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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 June 2013

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Meningitis B Vaccine

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Jim Wells has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject.

Mr Wells: The Devine family from Strabane is here today and has presented me with its Time for Terri petition, which calls on the United Kingdom Government to introduce the new meningitis B vaccine. It is supported by representatives of the charity, Meningitis Research Foundation.

On 21 December 2008, Marie and Sean Devine tragically lost their daughter Terri at the tender age of 16 to the ruthless disease meningitis B. That was just days before Christmas and three days after Terri first complained of flu-like symptoms.

The Meningitis Research Foundation team in Belfast supported the family during that terrible time. Family members threw themselves into raising money for the charity, generating £60,000. The family also heard, through a Facebook page based in Cumbria, that names were being gathered for a petition to encourage the Government to introduce a vaccine for meningitis B, which is the condition that Terri had, and that the vaccine was waiting for a licence. The family has worked hard to gather signatures and is determined to put as much pressure as possible on decision-makers to have the vaccine introduced as part of the routine vaccination programme.

The family cannot bring Terri back but can help to save the lives of other children. The family have achieved an amazing level of support: 22,100 people have signed the Time for Terri petition, which calls for the introduction of the meningitis B vaccine as soon as possible to prevent more deaths and prevent children suffering serious after effects.

The Devine family know better than anyone how vitally important it is that our children are protected against all types of meningitis and septicaemia. Terri's sister Karen, her cousin Sarah-Jane Sweeney and Diane McConnell from the Meningitis Research Foundation travelled to 10 Downing Street last Thursday, accompanied by MPs Michelle Gildernew and Pat Doherty. They delivered a petition to the Prime Minister.

Meningitis and septicaemia affect around 3,600 people in the UK and Ireland annually. Meningitis B is responsible for the majority of cases of this disease in the British Isles. The disease can strike anyone, at any time, at any age, killing one in 10 and leaving a quarter of survivors with life-altering effects, such as deafness, brain damage and loss of limbs. There is a newly licensed meningitis B vaccine. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) is expected to make its recommendation on that tomorrow. The Meningitis Research Foundation was among the specialist organisations submitting data for consideration by the UK Government's JCVI, including the reported estimated lifetime cost for someone seriously disabled by meningitis B, which has been estimated to be as much as £3 million per patient.

At last there is an opportunity to dramatically reduce the devastating impact of meningitis B. The Devine family supports the Meningitis Research Foundation, and is urging the Government to introduce the new meningitis B vaccine as soon as possible. Any delay will mean unnecessary deaths and children growing up with disabilities and needlessly limited opportunities to reach their full potential.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I now present the petition to you on behalf of the Devine family, hoping, as we all do, that we will be able to eradicate this terrible disease from our society.

Mr Wells moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I will also send a copy to the Chairperson of the Health Committee.

Ministerial Statements

Putting Pupils First: Reforming the Common Funding Scheme

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Le do chead, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a dhéanamh ar an 'Athbhreithniú Neamhspleách ar an Scéim Chomónta Maoinithe' a foilsíodh ag deireadh mhí Eanáir agus breac-chuntas a thabhairt ar conas atá sé beartaithe agam rudaí a thabhairt chun tosaigh.

With your permission, I wish to make a statement on 'An Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme', which was published at the end of January, and to outline how I intend to move forward.

Members will recall that I was not satisfied that the common funding scheme, which determines how funds are allocated to schools, was fit for purpose. I did not believe that the scheme adequately supported my key policy objectives, in particular raising standards, targeting social need and building a network of strong and sustainable schools.

Tá, agus beidh, m'fhócas ar thús áite a thabhairt do dhaltai i gcónaí. Cuireann seo taca faoi gach polasaí atá á chur i bhfeidhm agam agus gach cinneadh a dhéanaim mar Aire Oideachais.

My focus will always be on putting pupils first. That underpins every policy I am implementing and every decision I undertake as Education Minister. I therefore commissioned an independent panel, led by Sir Bob Salisbury, to examine this area and report back to me. I wish to thank Sir Bob, Evan Bates and Eemer Eivers for all their work on this review. I know that they engaged in extensive consultation and meetings as part of the exercise. Their report was published and placed on my Department's website at the end of January. Members will have had time to examine the report and the 29 wide-ranging recommendations it contains.

I specifically sought the Education Committee's views on the report and the recommendations contained within it. I want to thank the Committee for its detailed consideration of the report, the consultation with stakeholders that it undertook to inform its response and the response it provided to me. I encouraged consideration of the report by the strategic forum established by my Department. The forum facilitates engagement between education trade unions, senior staff in my

Department and the education and library boards, and other arm's-length bodies that we sponsor. These views have helped to shape and inform my thinking on the way forward.

I have already outlined to the Assembly in earlier statements how I intend to drive up standards and to move forward on embedding area-based planning. This report on our common funding scheme and my response to it are about continuing and reinforcing that direction of travel. I want to make it clear that commissioning this review was not about saving money. It was about making better use of the funding that we have and using it to promote strong, vibrant schools that put pupils and their needs and aspirations first.

Following this statement, my Department will publish a revised common funding scheme for consultation in the next couple of weeks. The changes that it will contain will reflect the recommendations in the review report and my response to those. While today's statement provides an opportunity for me to set out my position on the key recommendations, I am also publishing in more detail a formal response to each of the 29 recommendations that the independent review panel made in its report.

The independent review panel made a number of recommendations relating to how we allocate, monitor and account for funding. Those include recommendations to restrict the number of funded initiatives for schools, to review earmarked funding, and to ensure that, where earmarked or short-term funding is necessary, there is a clear exit strategy. I accept the recommendations in respect of limiting earmarked funds and maximising the amount of moneys that go directly to schools via the aggregated schools budget. That is what schools told the review panel they wanted. I will review the earmarked funds that currently go to schools and establish whether those could be added to the aggregated schools budget and delegated directly to schools. It will not be possible, or indeed appropriate, to remove every earmarked budget. However, I will ensure that those are all reviewed to test whether they need to remain.

In that context, it is important that I make clear my view that money delegated to schools should be spent on improving the outcomes for the children and young people at those schools. My Department already has in place limits for surpluses and deficits. Those recognise that schools need flexibility and provide for schools to accumulate modest deficits or surpluses of up to 5% of their total budget or £75,000, whichever is less. However, too many schools

are outside those limits. Last year, 86 primary schools held surpluses in excess of £100,000; seven of those had surpluses in excess of £250,000. The review has recommended that there should be stronger financial challenge and intervention procedures for schools with excessive surpluses and deficits, similar to those that are in place for school improvement.

It cannot be good practice that some schools are sitting on what can only be described as large surpluses when the Assembly voted for that funding to be spent on educating the pupils who they have enrolled. It is even less tenable for schools in which educational outcomes are low to hoard surpluses that could be spent on improving those outcomes. Equally, schools are no different from any other publicly funded bodies in that they must live within the resources allocated to them and not run up deficits. When that happens, the money needed to cover those deficits has to be found from other parts of the education service; that, too, is not tenable.

The best education systems internationally combine a high level of autonomy for schools with a high level of accountability for schools. I am committed to allowing schools the flexibility and freedom to make decisions on how best to meet the educational needs of their pupils within their budgets. I am equally committed to ensuring that there is robust accountability for the outcomes that they achieve. In that context, the review also recommends that my Department should explore the practical implications of allowing any school to adopt the systems of financial management operated for voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools. Some schools have made it clear to me that they would welcome the freedom that they perceive comes with having their own bank accounts. Others have made equally clear their view that that would be a burden that they do not wish to carry. I will accept the recommendation to explore that further. I intend to explore it once we have progressed the Education Bill and the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) has been established.

The independent review makes several recommendations that are designed to ensure that arrangements for funding schools support more effectively my Department's sustainable schools policy and the work on area planning. That has perhaps been the most challenging aspect of reforming our common funding scheme. The review panel's view is that the current means of funding small schools does not acknowledge the need to improve how we plan our schools estate on an area basis. The

panel recommended that I remove all small schools factors from the current funding. However, it has to be recognised that strategically important small schools would, in that scenario, have to be supported by funding outside the new formula to deliver effective education for the pupils.

10.45 am

I know that much concern has been expressed about that recommendation. Although I accept the recommendation in principle, I am not, however, implementing it at this time. Small schools should be reassured that those factors will not be removed from the common funding formula overnight. However, I do want to signal that, although small schools factors in the current formula will be retained for the 2014-15 financial year, schools and managing authorities should not rely on the continuation of the funding allocated via those factors in the longer term. As I have stated previously, all six sustainable schools criteria have to be taken into account when deciding the future of a school, and a budget inflated through the small schools factors is not the single deciding factor for sustainability. I reserve the capacity to make further adjustments to the funding formula, including the small schools factors, in future years to reflect and respond to progress on area planning.

The area-planning work that is under way aims to have the right schools of the right type and the right size in the right place. Those area plans may determine that there is a need for a small school, and I assure the Assembly that, when that is the case, small schools that have been identified as strategically important will receive the resources that they need to provide the best possible education for the children whom they serve. The difference from the current position is that those small schools will be planned and approved. They will not be there just because they have always been there but because they represent the best solution for young people in that area.

The panel also recommended the development of a small schools policy that identifies and safeguards strategically important small schools. I have no difficulty with the thinking behind that recommendation, but I do not believe that another policy is necessary. We already have a sustainable schools policy that sets out the criteria and quality indicators to help managing authorities to assess schools' sustainability. We already have an extensive area-based planning process under way, designed to ensure that schools are planned strategically to deliver sustainable, high-quality

education. Within that existing policy, I will provide further clarification on the circumstances as to when a small school will need to be retained and how it will be supported. My focus in moving forward that element of the reform will be to concentrate on implementing the policies that we have and ensuring that funding arrangements support those policies. I do not intend to introduce another policy that I do not believe is needed. What is needed are decisions.

Funding for our young people with special educational needs (SEN) is also covered by the report. The review, therefore, considers the pros and cons of funding our special schools via the funding formula. It also includes specific recommendations relating to funding to support pupils with special educational needs and funding for special schools.

There are challenges associated with adopting a formulaic approach to allocating funding for SEN support when that support is designed to reflect the individual needs of a pupil with special educational needs and will, therefore, vary from pupil to pupil. Quite sensibly, the independent review concluded that such funding does not, at this time, lend itself to allocation via a formula. I agree with that conclusion. However, I am conscious that leaders in our special schools want greater autonomy, greater delegation and greater flexibility to take decisions. From speaking to them, I know that they also accept the need for greater accountability.

I am, therefore, accepting the recommendation that consistent financial management information should be recorded for special schools to inform decisions and to plan spending. That is sensible practice and should already be happening. If it is not happening, I will expect the necessary steps to be put in place. The recommendation also calls for a specific review of special schools funding once the practice of setting down and reviewing consistent financial information has bedded in. I want to explore further with governors and school leaders in special schools what more might be done to ensure that the route by which they receive their funding does not impede their ability to make decisions that are best made at the school level.

A key focus of the independent panel's review was to examine how a revised funding formula would better support my determination to address educational underachievement and help to break the link between social disadvantage and low educational outcomes. Despite continued yearly improvement, the

system still leads to disadvantaged pupils being only half as likely to achieve five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A* to C, including in English and maths, as their more affluent counterparts, and that presents an educational, economic and political challenge that we, as legislators, cannot ignore and cannot allow to continue. I am pleased, therefore, that the review panel addressed that significant dimension of its remit with rigour. It recognised that pupils from socially deprived backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome and that schools need to do more to assist them in breaking that linkage. It makes very clear, through the evidence-based recommendations, that more funding should be targeted at pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

The review also recognised that the issues that schools face in overcoming barriers created by social deprivation are significantly increased with increasing numbers of children from less affluent backgrounds. The panel, therefore, recommended that funding for socio-economic deprivation should be weighted towards schools with significant concentrations of disadvantage to reflect the negative effects of such concentrations.

It will be no surprise to Members, therefore, to note that I accept and fully endorse these recommendations. Indeed, I intend to inject a further £10 million into school budgets next year, with that funding being allocated to help schools with the greatest concentrations of disadvantage to address underachievement among their disadvantaged pupils. Although this will be good news for many schools, I make it clear, however, that the extra money will need to be accounted for. To draw down that additional funding, schools will need to set out how they plan to use it to help pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve their full potential. They will have flexibility in identifying actions, but they will be held to account for the outcomes that they deliver.

I expect these interventions to link teaching and learning with the work that those schools undertake as extended schools and to involve outreach to parents and communities as well as direct support for the young people themselves. ESA will have a critical role to play in scrutinising schools' plans and in supporting schools in identifying suitable interventions to meet pupils' needs. The inspectorate will also ensure that, through the inspection process, there is an appropriate focus on the outcomes achieved for pupils with this funding.

Before I leave social deprivation funding, I ask Members to note that the review panel also

made reference to the methodology that my Department uses to allocate this funding. I am pleased that the review recognised free school meals entitlement as the best available indicator of social disadvantage, but I am also content to accept the recommendation that this is something that should be kept under review. If a better measure emerges, it is only right that we should consider it.

The review also recommended that I consider adjusting the eligibility criteria for free school meals. It is important that I signal the complexity that proposed welfare reform introduces in that area. The proposed introduction of universal credit will, if agreed, require us to change the eligibility criteria for free school meals and, indeed, for assistance with the costs of school uniforms. I will shortly have to reach decisions on the trigger points for eligibility, and I will announce more detail on that at the appropriate time.

For now, I confirm that, whether eligibility is determined under the current or any new arrangements, it is my intention to apply the same eligibility criteria for free school meals both for primary and post-primary pupils from September 2014. That means that post-primary pupils from our lowest-income families will be supported with access to free school meals in the same way as our primary pupils. It also ensures that the post-primary schools that they attend will be supported in a similar way.

Balance of funding between primary schools and post-primary schools has also been an area of interest to the review, and there has been considerable interest in that issue. The review has recommended that that should be kept under review. I accept entirely the importance of early intervention, and I know that nursery and primary schools have long campaigned for more funding, making the point that they could deliver so much more with additional funding. Primary schools have equally made it clear to me that additional funding for them should not be at the expense of post-primary schools.

All the evidence shows that our post-primary schools are facing real challenges at present. We know that they are seeing the impact of earlier demographic decline, which has stabilised at primary level, and that they are much more likely to be facing challenges in living within budget than their primary counterparts. We also know that, although our primary schools are outperforming those in most other countries, the same cannot be said about some of our post-primary schools.

When resources permit, I will consider the scope to increase primary school funding. I will not do that at the expense of post-primary schools. However, what I want to do in preparation for that time is to ensure that future Education Ministers have the levers that they need to target funding to primary schools. One of the drawbacks of our current formula is that its complexity inhibits our ability to do that. Therefore, I will be consulting with schools on a model that will see us operating two separate formulae: one for primary and nursery schools and one for post-primary schools.

Members and, of course, schools will want to know how all of that will affect the make-up of the common funding formula and funding for individual schools. The review panel set out very clearly the key principles that should underpin a new common funding scheme, and I have accepted those principles. The panel also urged me to consider implementation of a new funding formula made up of a range of elements with a clear focus on funding to reflect pupil rather than institutional needs and to provide support for young people — those from a disadvantaged background or who face other barriers — with the clear purpose of ensuring that schools are funded equitably, transparently and to reflect the needs of the pupils that they serve.

Work is well advanced on a new funding formula informed by the recommendations in the review report, and I intend to launch a consultation on it in the coming weeks.

The independent review of the common funding scheme provides us with a sound basis for making change that will improve how schools are funded and ensure that funding more closely supports my core policy priorities. Although I have not accepted every single recommendation, I have accepted the vast majority. My officials are currently finalising a model that reflects the position that I have outlined today. I remain determined that the changes will be made from next April. I therefore plan to issue details of the proposals in the next couple of weeks so that schools will have time to consider them. Although schools are not closed for the duration of the summer holidays, teachers and governors, like the rest of us, need a summer break, and I plan to extend the consultation period into October to give schools ample time to digest the proposals and provide views. I will, of course, want to hear views from other stakeholders also.

My officials will be happy to brief the Education Committee in more detail in the coming weeks, and I will arrange to place a copy of the

consultation documentation in the Assembly Library for Members' consideration as soon as it is ready. Reform of how we fund our schools is needed if they are to be able to deliver the outcomes for our young people that we need them to deliver.

Ba mhian liom na bealaí a fheicim le feabhasúcháin a dhéanamh a leagan amach. Níos tábhachtaí ná seo, ba mhaith liom na smaointe seo a thástáil le scoileanna agus le daoine eile le féachaint an bhfuil réitigh níos fearr ann ná na cinn a thiocfaimid suas leo.

I want to set out how I think improvements can be made. More importantly, I want to test those ideas with schools and others to explore whether there are better solutions than the ones that we will come up with.

Réitigh ar féidir leo freagairt níos fearr ar mo dhiongbháilteacht tús áite a thabhairt do dhaltaí.

There may be solutions that can more effectively respond to my determination to put pupils first. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): The Education Committee has given the matter considerable time and consideration. The figures are significant, as the overall resource budget spent by schools or allocated by the Department is over £1 billion a year.

The formula under which funding is allocated, according to Sir Bob, is confusing and inconsistent. Therefore, the Education Committee recognises that simplification of the common funding formula is much needed. However, the Committee also recognises that it is difficult to assess the effect of any significant changes to the common funding formula scheme without sight of the full outworking of the Minister's proposals, and what we have today in the House is an appended statement and information detailing the Department's further work on each of the recommendations that Sir Bob made. The Education Committee therefore welcomes the Minister's assurance that it will be kept informed on the matters.

I think that the Committee will welcome elements of what the Minister said today, including the extension of the free school meals eligibility criteria to post-primary schools. That having been said, the Committee has concerns about a single measure of deprivation, which might not identify hard-to-reach groups and does not fit the usual definition of "deprivation".

11.00 am

The Committee will be surprised that the Department has rejected out of hand recommendation 22, which would inform the development of alternative measures of deprivation. Maybe the Minister could elaborate on why he has dismissed that recommendation completely. We also welcome the Minister's intention to ensure that a bigger share of the budget goes to schools.

In conclusion, will the Minister clarify to the House today his definition of a strategically important small school and how that will be determined in light of his announcement today? Although reference was made to surpluses in some primary schools, I trust that this is not an attempt to rob the rich to pay the poor and is not a situation where, rather than social engineering to advance education, we have financial engineering, which will have a detrimental impact on schools across Northern Ireland, particularly in those areas where there is good financial management and good outcomes. Maybe the Minister could give some comfort to those schools that have good sound financial management that today's statement is not an attack on them but is about trying to put in place a system that is fair — fair on the basis of educational need and not on any other criteria.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for your questions. I will try to cover them as best I can.

I accept the point that the Chair of the Committee made that the Committee cannot respond in full to the draft common funding scheme until it has seen the document, and that it will respond during the consultation. That is a fair point. I assure the Member that we are at the final stages of drafting that, and we will publish it as soon as possible to get feedback from the Committee.

The review recognised that free school meals entitlement was a good and sturdy measure. Other reviews have also recognised it as a competent way to measure the individual needs of a child. No one has come up with an alternative to date. If an alternative is brought forward, as the review team recommended, then I am more than happy to bring it forward.

Recommendation 22 states that:

"Data should be gathered on maternal education for inclusion in pupil databases, and its efficacy modelled as a measure of additional educational need."

That is not necessarily to do with social deprivation: it is an acknowledgement that the mother's education has a strong bearing on the child's outcomes. Although we accept that that research is accurate, gathering that information and research would place a greater burden on schools than the benefit it would have for education. We are saying that it is more important for us to tackle social deprivation and to fund schools to tackle social deprivation.

With regard to whether we are going to rob the rich to pay for the poor; if that has to be done, then we will do it. All the evidence points us to the fact that young people who come from socially deprived backgrounds face greater challenges in education than those who come from more affluent backgrounds. If the evidence points us in that direction, then we have to deal with it.

What I have done and the way in which I am setting out the common funding formula ensures that all schools are treated fairly and equally. Those schools that have greater needs are funded to provide for the young people under their care. The Member often refers to social engineering. Social engineering already exists in our education system, and it is called academic selection. It ensures that the vast majority of children from socially deprived backgrounds go to one school and those from less socially deprived backgrounds go to another. If the Member is opposed to social engineering, I am on the same page as him. Let us resolve that issue.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Chris Hazzard. Sorry, just before that, and bearing in mind yesterday's experience, there is quite an interest in the topic, and I want to be fair to all Members. Members should be aware that it is questions on the statement and that it is one question only per Member.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It is a clear signal that the Minister is prepared and is engaging in rebalancing the distribution of resources in our education system in the interests of the aspirations and needs of our pupils and not the interests of the institutions that they might attend. In that light, the panel made it very clear that we should be increasing funding for pupils from socially deprived areas. The Minister signalled today —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I need a question.

Mr Hazzard: — an investment of £10 million into the school budgets next year. Will he outline whether he will be investing further in targeting social need (TSN) in the year ahead?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I estimate that it will cost approximately £30 million over the next two financial years to meet the additional funding in the formula for targeting social need and to allow pupils attending post-primary schools to be eligible for free school meals and free school uniforms. I think that is money well spent.

The Member and the House will be aware that, earlier this year, I restructured my budget. In particular, I targeted a significant pot of money that had been set aside for redundancies. I set £20 million of that pot aside to deal with the outworkings of the common funding formula, and I am going to use that pot and other slippage moneys in my Department to fund some of those programmes. That £30 million is an investment in the future of the young people concerned and, therefore, an investment in our society.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the news that he is going to maximise the amount of funding that comes through the aggregated schools budget. In respect of earmarked funding, will the Minister clarify the premium for shared education?

Mr O'Dowd: I am studying the recommendations in the shared education report to see whether there is any crossover between it and the common funding formula review. We fund schools to carry out a range of activities, including shared education, through the common funding formula. Schools are funded for those sorts of activities outside their regular responsibilities: extracurricular activities, if you want to put it that way. Funding is available to schools to carry out work within various models, but we are talking to other funding bodies to see how we can ensure that the recommendations in the shared education report are funded as well.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome much in the statement, especially the fact that he is going to keep the Committee briefed and that he is proposing no change at the moment in funding for small schools. In addressing recommendation 3, he indicates that he is going to look at the financial management in voluntary schools. Why is he continually attacking voluntary schools when he is using an extremely good example of how well they work? Why does he not look at adopting

the other things that voluntary schools do extremely well? That would speed things along.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not accept that I am continually attacking voluntary schools. I attack the social engineering that takes place in some of our voluntary schools in respect of how they allow pupils access. One of the findings of the common funding formula review under Sir Bob Salisbury is that, when you have a significant number of pupils from a socially deprived background in a large concentration in one school, it is a disadvantage to those schools. We are now having to address that by using public funds to counteract the effects of academic selection in our system. That is something that you need to consider. There is a better way of doing this. A social mix of pupils across our schools is more internationally recognised as the best way of dealing with the effects of social deprivation. We are having to address the imbalance here with funding.

I want to explore the voluntary principle further. Voluntary schools hold the principle very dear, and it is one of the issues that they are raising in relation to the ESA report. A number of non-voluntary schools have made it clear that they would like to adopt the voluntary principle. I am willing to explore that with them further, and if we can come to an agreement on the way forward, I will be happy to introduce it for other schools, but there are pros and cons. It places a significant administrative burden on a school, and services provided centrally by the boards or by ESA will have to be adopted by the school. That will take finance away from educating young people because the schools will have to fund their financial management themselves. However, I am happy to explore the issue further and allow schools to make the final decision on whether or not they want to become voluntary.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome the Minister's statement. My question follows on from Mr Kinahan's. The Minister's comments about the possibility of allowing other schools to adopt the financial management model currently used by voluntary grammar schools seems to come with the caveat that it is conditional on the Education Bill and ESA being established. That is not the only reference in the statement to that condition. How vital does the Minister regard it that the ESA Bill is progressed with all speed, and will it be possible to make those changes if the ESA Bill does not go ahead, as some of us fear?

Mr O'Dowd: I am of the mind at the moment that it is not a case of if ESA will happen but when ESA will happen. We had protracted discussions on the ESA Bill for many years when I was on the Education Committee with the Member. I would have liked to see it progress much quicker than it has, but I am not concerned that ESA will not happen. It is a case of when ESA will happen.

ESA is very important because it will ensure that we have an effective, efficient and modern management structure that can deal with many of the issues facing education. The recommendations in Sir Bob Salisbury's report will move forward. I am of the view that they will move forward with ESA, so I am not overly concerned or in the frame of mind that ESA is not happening; it is when ESA happens. If there is a significant delay, we will continue to move those recommendations forward anyway.

Miss M McIlveen: The Minister states that he is going to reserve the capacity to make further adjustments to the funding formula, including the small schools factor. Will he consult at a later date on those adjustments, or will he be consulting on the reservation that he is proposing within the scheme to publish shortly? He went on to say that he will give an assurance to the Assembly around small schools, but I am not sure that the Assembly can take comfort from a verbal statement at this stage.

Mr O'Dowd: Well, all I can give you is a verbal statement at this stage. Of course I will consult if there are to be further changes to small schools funding. I am legally obliged to do so. Any changes to the common funding formula have to be consulted on, so if we move towards a stage where it is believed that there have to be changes to small schools funding then, yes, there will be further consultation.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is a good news story for many schools. Schools will now have to do a particular piece of work in relation to accountability and how they use that extra funding. I particularly welcome the news on free school meals eligibility. As a member of the Education Committee who contributed to some of the views in the recommendations, I am delighted that the Department has greatly looked at and accepted recommendation 11. However, can the Minister be more specific on when his Department will review transport policy, and is that likely to happen in 2013?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question. The Member has raised transport issues with me on several occasions, specifically in and around Strabane and the rural hinterlands of Strabane. Yes, I want to see the review take place in 2013. I am trying to identify appropriate individuals to carry out that review. It is a specialised piece of work. With my departmental officials, I am trying to identify the appropriate candidates to move that forward.

Mr Craig: I read with interest in your statement, Minister, that you will ensure that schools are planned strategically and are sustainable. You also said that you will have further clarification on how a small school will be retained. With regard to both those statements, will the Minister please give the House an assurance that strategic planning will be done on a cross-education board basis, as I have witnessed in border areas of boards the strategic aspect of the planning fall apart? More importantly, when will he give us that clarification?

Mr O'Dowd: Cross-border planning — cross-board planning — was raised recently by your colleague Mr Spratt during a debate on schools in south and east Belfast, and the crossover between the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I am of the view that it is much improved. Indeed, we have brought the boards and other planning authorities together to continue area planning and to ensure greater co-ordination and co-operation, so I am satisfied that that is much improved. Of course, I will continue to monitor the situation to ensure that it continues to improve.

11.15 am

In relation to clarification around when a small school is required, the sustainable schools policy sets out the criteria; it sets out travel distances, etc, in relation to small schools. I will provide further clarification to the Committee, with regard to my statement, on the strategic importance of small schools as we move forward, but it will be based on the current sustainable schools policy.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on his statement this morning; it is a very exciting statement. Minister, leaders in our special schools are looking to have greater autonomy. What can we put in place for those leaders in special schools so that they will accept greater accountability, which will allow them to achieve that greater autonomy?

Mr O'Dowd: The report sets out the need for greater clarity on how the funding in special educational needs schools is delegated, etc. I think we need to go through those measures first, and, in parallel with that, I will have discussions with the leaders in our special schools. Indeed, I recently met a delegation of leaders from our special schools. We covered a wide range of areas in our discussions, including financial autonomy for those schools. They are keen to take on more responsibility, and I believe that they have the skills base to do so. However, let us cover the first measures of the report about detailing exactly what funding goes into special schools and how it is used and, then, move forward as to how we fund those schools in the future and how that finance is governed, particularly by boards of governors, principals and leaders.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister state whether a rural school's criterion, as well as TSN, will be included in the common funding formula? Does the Minister recognise that the criterion for 105 pupils is already killing the potential viability of many small rural schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The small schools formula, which covers many of our rural schools, will remain as part of the common funding formula, and it is a significant contribution. Tens of millions of pounds of additional funding are going into the common funding formula to cover small schools, including small schools in urban areas. It is worth noting that the definition of "rural" in the sustainable schools policy is everything outside Derry City Council area and Belfast City Council area, so we cover a very significant geographical area. I do not accept that the criterion of 105 pupils is killing off our rural schools. There are many, many rural schools with 105 or more, and many have fewer than 105. None of them will be judged simply on that number. The only person I am aware of who is fixated with that number is your good self.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note the Department's response to recommendation 11, which relates to transport policy, is that the Minister will advance a review of its provision and eligibility. I very much welcome that; indeed, two years ago, the Ulster Unionist Party passed a motion calling on him to do that. Will he give a commitment that that review of home-to-school transport will be primarily driven to make it fairer and to allow it to adopt a more common-sense approach, rather than solely to deliver savings?

Mr O'Dowd: The transport budget in our Department is currently around £70 million. A significant proportion of our budget goes towards transport. During the previous Administration, the then Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, and the Finance Minister, Mr Sammy Wilson, agreed that the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) should review transport across the boards. PEDU has since brought forward a report covering how transport could be provided more efficiently across the five education boards. We are agreeing an action plan as to how we implement those recommendations. So, I can stand and say that we should not approach it simply on the basis of saving money. If there is money to be saved and used more effectively in transport or in other parts of the Department of Education, I think it is only right and proper that we should do that.

You mentioned a fairer and more common-sense approach. Yes, of course, I want to see a fairer and more equal distribution of resources across our society, and I want to ensure that our transport system is delivering a service that we can stand over. The review will cover all those aspects in relation to how transport is provided currently and how more effectively, more efficiently and more equitably it should be provided in the future.

Mr Spratt: In relation to recommendation 11, does the Minister propose to limit the availability of bus passes to children and, as a result, force them to go to their nearest school?

Mr O'Dowd: The terms of reference of the transport review have not yet been completed. I will ask the review to make a holistic examination of the transport policy and how we effectively and efficiently use more than £70 million of public money. How can the Member argue against that? If a pupil can travel to a good school nearby, why would we transport them 30 or 40 miles to another good school? Let us provide good services to our communities close to hand, rather than having to transport people 30 or 40 miles to other good schools.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note from it that he tells us that, in future, small schools will be planned and approved. Of course, many of our existing small schools were not planned or approved in that sense. Is this the death knell for those schools? Is it the end of the pretence that the Minister is committed to the retention of small schools that have served their communities diligently for many years?

Mr O'Dowd: I have to say that the SDLP is not involved in an education debate on small schools; it is involved in a political campaign on small schools. The SDLP has yet to point out to me where the sustainable schools policy is wrong or how it would improve that policy. It has come out with various statements on how it would keep every school open and how it believes that all rural schools, regardless of their educational provision and outcomes, should be kept open. If it is seriously interested in sustaining viable rural communities, it needs to start by providing excellent rural education to the young people who live in those communities. Surely, it should insist that rural communities have access to good education in the same way as we would expect an urban setting to have good access to education. If the SDLP has an alternative policy, I am still waiting to see it.

Mr Allister: I declare an interest as the chairman of the board of governors of a primary school. Why does the Minister wish to discriminate further in funding against schools that, through no fault of their own, have fewer pupils who get free school meals, yet have the same overheads and needs as other schools? The Minister wants to provide them with less funding than neighbouring schools. Why does he want to discriminate against those schools?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not accept the term "discriminate". I know that the Member is an expert on the subject, but I do not accept that term.

Schools will continue to be funded to meet their needs. We are saying — international evidence points to this — that children from a socially deprived background face greater barriers to education. Therefore, their educational outcomes are lesser. I am sure that the Member would agree that if we can tackle the issues that face socially deprived young people at a very early age, society benefits in the long run because those young people go on to be valuable members of society and have more chance of getting employment and contributing to society and less chance of ending up in the justice system and costing society further in the future. Let us put the investment in at the start to ensure that those young people have a good start in life and move on from there.

I do not accept that schools will not be funded in the future. Of course, since coming into post, I have constantly argued that the education budget, in its universal capacity, is severely underfunded. Let us use the funds that we have to best of our ability. If more funding

becomes available, I will distribute it across all our schools.

Mrs D Kelly: I note that, in the report, the Minister — or, at least, the authors — acknowledge the fact that the mother is still the children's best teacher. My question follows on from free school meals as an indicator. I think that it is recommendation 20 that states that there will be further examination of other factors that might well be taken into account. I am sure that the Minister will be aware that many people who find themselves described as the working poor have an income that is maybe 1p above the level for eligibility. How will this be taken forward, and when might he reach a conclusion on the analysis?

Mr O'Dowd: Your original comment about the mother being a very important element in a child's education is clearly true. Mothers play a very important role in children's development, and we would never attempt to take that away from them.

In relation to free school meals entitlement, my predecessor Cairtriona Ruane expanded eligibility for free school meals and, I have to say, met some resistance to that. We have further expanded that. As a result of my announcement today, something in the region of 15,000 more pupils in post-primary schools will be entitled to free school meals than would have been the case had I remained with the status quo.

As regards how we catch more people within the free school meals entitlement, welfare reform or the attempts to introduce it have stymied a lot of development in a number of programmes that I want to do in the Department of Education. I want to look at the entry criteria for nursery school places, in terms of benefits and income brackets and free school meals, but let us wait to see what happens with welfare reform. If welfare reform is introduced, I will have to introduce a new policy on the eligibility criteria for free school meals. My starting point for that will be to ensure that anyone currently eligible for free school meals remains eligible, and I will look to see whether we can expand that.

Mr D McIlveen: Minister, notwithstanding the fact that the duration of the consultation falls between July and August, when, I think, most people in the teaching profession will take a much-earned rest, the entire duration of this consultation is comparable to the length of the consultation on the High Hedges Act. Does the Minister see the high hedges of Northern

Ireland as being on an equal footing with the future of education?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that there is a statutory limit to consultations. The limit is eight weeks, and the maximum is 12 weeks; it is somewhere in and around those figures. Government cannot shut down for two months every summer, much as I, and perhaps people here, would like it to. I cannot stop the Department of Education for two months every summer and await the schools returning. We have to continue policy development and implementation. The consultation is going out over the summer months, but it does not end until October. That gives ample time for any school or individual who wishes to respond to do so. There is no comparison with high hedges, low hedges or any other sort of hedge.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Turnaround and Support Team Report

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on the report of the turnaround and support team on the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

As Members will recall, I made a written statement to the House on 10 December 2012 on the appointment of a small turnaround and support team to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to complete a strategic overview to establish what changes and support might be required to accelerate progress at the trust. The team was asked to provide an assessment of the changes required to improve performance and to support the management of the trust in the delivery of services.

As I highlighted in my statement in December, the trust has faced challenges since its establishment in April 2007. Despite the support measures that were put in place previously to assist the trust, there were no signs of sufficient improvement in waiting times in the trust's emergency departments. It was in light of those concerns and following a request from the chief executive of the Northern Trust for further support to address those issues that the decision was taken to appoint the turnaround and support team. Under its terms of reference, the team was asked to take forward the work in two phases, with phase 1 focusing on the analysis of the challenges facing the trust and its ability to deliver on services commissioned and phase 2 focusing

on turnaround and support in light of the findings of phase 1.

I have now received the report from the turnaround team detailing the findings of phase 1 of the review. The report addresses the terms of reference comprehensively, and I am very grateful to Sue Page and her team for the significant work in taking this forward. I will make the report publicly available on the Department's website today.

11.30 am

In line with the terms of reference for phase 1, the review included an analysis and assessment of the challenges faced by the trust and its ability to deliver on the services commissioned, taking account of previous reviews and their implementation and drawing on information about similar providers elsewhere. Given the need to reduce waiting times for unscheduled care, the review examined performance, including the quality and safety of services and outcomes and patient experience at the trust's emergency departments, and identified specific areas and aspects of the trust's work and its relationships with other providers of health and social care where improvement is required. The report provides the team's assessment of leadership capacity at the trust and the changes necessary to improve performance.

The report makes five distinct recommendations. Those are to enhance leadership capacity at the trust and empower clinicians to lead change; to ensure support to deliver an improvement plan in three phases; to gain assurances that governance and quality systems are robust; to gain assurance that mortality data is robust; and to put in place a performance framework that will ensure delivery of the improvement plan and contains clear consequences for non-delivery alongside incentives for delivery.

The review has taken a hands-on approach, with practical engagement between the turnaround team and Northern Trust staff at individual and group level with front line staff and managers. It also involves visits to other healthcare providers to observe alternative ways of working. Throughout the review, the team not only focused on issues that were impediments to improving performance but considered the existing capacity for improvement and opportunities to develop new capacity for improvement in the trust.

The overall analysis, however, has identified that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust

is in a poor position and requires intensive support to improve. It is reassuring to note that the team concluded that the trust can be turned around. That is essential to improve patient care and experience at the trust. However, support needs to be provided to enable it to do so.

Members will be aware that I announced the appointment of two senior directors to the Northern Trust on 2 May. The appointments were made, in light of the emerging findings of the turnaround team at that time, to lead on the next stages of the turnaround process to improve critical areas of service delivery. Mary Hinds and Paul Cummings joined the trust on temporary secondment from the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) respectively on 13 May. As senior director of turnaround, Mary Hinds will lead the improvement programme in the Antrim and Causeway hospitals and the related community services. In his role as senior director of corporate management, Paul Cummings will oversee the remaining service directorates and the corporate management functions. A new acting medical director is now in place, and two middle management staff have also been seconded to the trust from the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency. These appointments are the first steps in the change as part of the intensive support programme that will be provided to the trust to ensure that the necessary turnaround is achieved. The overriding objective is that the interests of and outcomes for patient care are at the centre of trust activity.

Specifically, the report recommends a three-phased improvement plan. Phase 1 has three separate components covering the operational delivery of services at Antrim Area Hospital; operational delivery of services at the Causeway Hospital; and maximising primary and community care and older people's services. Phase 2 will involve developing clinical networks and integrating clinical teams with devolved accountability. The outcome for phase 2 should be that clinical services become fully integrated and aligned to populations, with an accountability framework in place to manage resources and agree priorities for service review. Phase 3 will involve a systematic programme of service reviews to implement Transforming Your Care (TYC). The outcome for phase 3 should be the systematic delivery of the changes needed in line with the strategic objectives of TYC.

Initially, the key element of the work will be the delivery of phase 1 of the improvement plan. It is anticipated that this phase will be completed

within six months. The Department will put in place governance arrangements to monitor progress against the plan. In that regard, it will work closely with the HSCB. It is important that the arrangements are effective but do not introduce an overly bureaucratic system that would impede progress.

The report signals the need to remove any sense of uncertainty about the Causeway Hospital's future management arrangements. I am very keen to remove that uncertainty. I told the House on 19 March that the TYC consultation had indicated significant support for the action set out in the 'Vision to Action' document. I confirmed that I was asking officials to begin work to take forward an options appraisal that would consider future management arrangements for the Causeway Hospital, such as whether it should remain in the Northern Trust or transfer in the near future to the Western Trust. Preparatory work on the options appraisal has begun.

I believe that the implementation of the turnaround team's recommendations will provide a solid basis to deliver the much-needed improvement at the Northern Trust. The learning will be shared across Northern Ireland. I do not underestimate the scale of the task involved. Members, trust staff and the public will want to consider carefully the team's report, which has been released today. The overriding consideration is the need to put the quality of patient care at the top of our priorities for Health and Social Care. I am determined, therefore, that improvements will be made at the trust. That is in the interests not just of patients but of the staff who work there. I recognise that turnaround will not happen overnight, although there are already some signs of improvement at the Antrim and Causeway hospitals. That is to be welcomed.

I stated previously my appreciation for the professionalism and continuing dedication of the doctors, nurses and other front line staff at the trust who want to provide safe, high-quality services to their patients and clients. Clinicians must be at the centre of the improvement process. I also recognise the commitment and determination shown by the previous and new management teams, and I want the Department, HSCB and PHA to work with the leadership in the trust to ensure that the actions that are now taken are fully effective in securing change. I am encouraged that the trust will follow a path that is clinically led and managerially supported. It is essential that the processes now under way are successful in delivering the much-needed improvements for the local community.

I commend the statement to the House.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and his officials for the briefing that the Deputy Chair and I received earlier.

Minister, you say in the report that clinicians have been disengaged, and you talked about empowering the clinicians to lead change. Does that mean that, up to this point, clinicians have been disengaged? If so, what do you mean by that? Moreover, what do you mean by empowering clinicians? I want to try to get some more detail on that.

Mortality data came up in the recommendations. Are you indicating that there have been doubts about how those data were collated? If so, what impact did that have? What does it mean for the future? The review team focused on impediments to improving performance. Can you give us more detail of what that actually means? Are we now over those impediments so that we can deliver the best possible care for patients?

Finally, senior staff have been seconded from the Public Health Agency and the board, including Mary Hinds and Paul Cummings. Can you give us an indication of how long they will be seconded to deliver and take forward this work in the Northern Trust?

Mr Poots: I will seek to answer all four questions. Where disengagement and empowerment are concerned, I think that communication is essential in any task. People can be absolutely brilliant at a range of activities in their particular job, but, if the communication skills are not good, that is not helpful to others. So, it is important that good communication exists throughout if we are to ensure that people are engaged. The left hand needs to know what the right hand is doing. All that will create the situation in which empowerment can happen, where there are greater levels of communication and closer working co-operation. I think that we can achieve more in that area.

There are multiple ways of calculating mortality, and the method that the Northern Trust uses does not give us any particular concern. However, to be absolutely certain, the report suggests running another methodology, such as that used by the Dr Foster organisation, to provide maximum assurance. We are not saying that there is any risk there, but we do

want to double up to ensure that we have that assurance.

On the impediments that might have been in our way, I think that leadership is critically important. Leaders have to be very proactive. They have to be on the ground talking and listening to key people, delivering the services in conjunction with those people and identifying what the needs are. There are great opportunities to ensure that we make the improvements that we want to see.

On the secondments, how long is a piece of string? It is important that we get this thing to work. It may take up to a year or somewhat longer, but, at the moment, we are perhaps looking at the secondments lasting up to a year. It could be less than that. We will see how we get on over the next couple of months and how things are improving before we move to make permanent appointments.

Mr Wells: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he let the Assembly know whether any other changes are anticipated among the senior management team in Antrim Area Hospital?

Mr Poots: The medical director's position will be advertised and filled. That is a very important position. We need strong leadership in that area to ensure that clinicians have the confidence that management is listening and so that management can ensure that clinicians respond to their needs.

One of the issues identified in the Northern Trust area was that, very often, senior consultants were allowed to take holidays at the same time, and things like that. That created problems unnecessarily. There are areas that we perhaps need to change, address and carry out improvements in. So, the medical director's post is one of the key positions that will be filled over the next number of months.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's statement. I particularly acknowledge his comments on behalf of the hundreds of staff who provide an excellent service in the Northern Trust. It is important to put that on record.

Will the Minister tell us what monitoring and evaluation techniques will be used to ensure the delivery of the report's recommendations? What is the time frame for achieving the same?

Mr Poots: I want the time frame for the delivery of some of the recommendations to be almost immediate. I want to see improvement at a

very early point, and we are looking at that. In the longer term, we are looking for the phase 1 improvements to be completed within six months. To reiterate what "phase 1" means, it covers the operational delivery of services at Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital, as well as maximising primary and community care and older people's services. That is a big task to have completed within six months.

On the governance arrangements, an improvement oversight group will be established and will be chaired by the Department. Initially, that group will meet monthly and, depending on progress, may move to meeting less frequently.

We need to ensure that we have appropriate monitoring without being overly bureaucratic and constantly bearing down on the people who have the task of carrying out the job. There will always be a degree of flexibility in all these issues, but it is very important that we keep our eye on the ball to ensure that the trust improves. For quite a number of years, the same problems have come up time and again in the same trust. We really need to get on top of those problems and move forward.

11.45 am

Mr Gardiner: I certainly welcome the Minister's statement and I encourage moving as quickly as possible. I wish him every success in looking after affairs in this. I do not think that I was really down for being called at this stage, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I think that it was more my colleague here, who is the spokesperson for our party on that score, but well done, Minister.

Mr McCarthy: I offer my best wishes to the Minister in the task that he has set out before us this morning. I think that it is the last-chance saloon for the Northern Trust, but I wish the Minister, Mary, Paul and everyone else every success in their endeavours. I refer the Minister to his reference in the statement to the trust's:

"ability to deliver on the services commissioned taking account of previous reviews, and ... information about similar providers elsewhere."

The Minister will be aware that the Northern Trust has not signed its service and budget agreement with the board for the last four years. Those agreements detail the work that is required by the board —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We need a question. The Member knows that one —

Mr McCarthy: Yes. Will the Minister tell the Assembly why the Northern Trust has not signed these important contracts for four years? How can the board monitor the services commissioned if the contract has not been signed? Could this horrendous neglect by all concerned — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK, gents —

Mr McCarthy: — have contributed to the disaster that is the Northern Trust?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is abusing the rights of other Members to ask questions.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Given that the new financial director and acting chief executive in the service is a former financial director in the board, I trust that those issues will be overcome as a result of that appointment.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he elaborate on why the Department is only now taking action to address emergency department waiting times in the Northern Trust?

Mr Poots: A series of actions has been taken to assist in the Northern Trust, and that work is ongoing. The problem was that we did not see the improvement in performance that we should have. We have had previous reports that I do not believe were fully implemented. Consequently, we have not benefited from the work that was carried out. We have a team in place now that is already making a difference in the Northern Trust. The turnaround team has done a good piece of work. It has worked closely with the Department and with people on the ground to identify the issues and problems that existed there.

My view, unlike that of the former chairman of the trust who said that we could not do better, is that the public have to get better; they deserve better, we have to do better and we will do better. That is why we are continuing to make differences here and to challenge and change. We will get there with the Northern Trust, albeit that the situation has been difficult for many years. Even before this trust was formed, the organisations that came together had their problems, and a lot of those problems came with those organisations. The Northern Trust has always had a difficult time. We need to get

to the point where the Northern Trust is not being talked about for the wrong reasons but for the many good things that are already happening in it and can be enhanced further. I commend all those staff who are doing excellent work in the facility.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin. I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he refers to the sense of uncertainty that exists about the Causeway Hospital. That uncertainty continues. I accept that preparatory work on an options appraisal has begun, but when will it be completed? What is its time frame and when will decisions be made?

Mr Poots: I fully accept that, while discussion continues, it will create uncertainty, so the sooner we can reach a conclusion, the better. However, we have to operate within legal parameters, so an options appraisal will be produced, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, which will go to public consultation. We will not go into it with preconceived notions because, at this point, I am not fully convinced that there should be a shift in the Causeway Hospital from the Northern Trust to the Western Trust. I see that there are strong and compelling reasons why that could happen, but there are also very strong reasons why it should remain in the Northern Trust.

We need to identify all the issues, consult the public and the clinical nursing staff, etc, within the Causeway Hospital, identify whether social services are to go with it or are to stay with the Northern Trust, and identify whether it is more suitable for the Causeway Hospital to stay with the Northern Trust. All of that needs to be tested very thoroughly, bearing in mind that we also need to remove uncertainty. We will proceed with that work in due course, but as quickly as possible.

Ms Brown: I welcome the positive statement from the Minister and the continued efforts to improve matters in the Northern Trust. This is obviously a great cause of concern for all of us, not least my constituents in South Antrim. Will the Minister reiterate the main conclusions in the turnaround team's report?

Mr Poots: The main conclusions were really the five recommendations that I mentioned, the first of which was that we need to enhance the leadership capacity at the trust and empower clinicians to lead change. I believe that that is already happening. We need to ensure support to deliver an improvement plan in three phases,

and that work is under way. We need to gain assurance that governance and quality systems are robust, and that is also happening as we speak. We need to gain assurance that the mortality data is robust, and we are looking at a different means of collecting that data that will, all being well, confirm that that data is robust. Finally, we need to put in place a performance framework that will ensure delivery of the improvement plan and contain clear consequences for non-delivery, alongside incentives for delivery. The overall monitoring team is in place, so things are moving quite quickly. I think that it is appropriate that we do move quickly to ensure that the team's recommendations are enacted.

Ms P Bradley: I also welcome the Minister's statement. As someone who worked for the Northern Trust, it is very bad to hear such negativity in this Chamber, especially the remarks about a last-chance saloon. I know that the staff at every level are working very hard on a daily basis, and they need our support and help. Will the Minister provide an update on the improvement action group for emergency departments?

Mr Poots: We are already seeing improvement in the emergency departments. However, it is early days and we do not want to introduce anything that appears to be at all complacent. For example, in April, there were 466 breaches in the 12-hour waiting times —

Mr McCarthy: Shame.

Mr Poots: I agree with the Member that that is a shame, and that is why we are acting. In May, that was reduced to 82. In June, there have been six breaches to date. That is still six breaches too many, but one can see the direction of travel and that improvements have been made quickly.

We held a workshop with trust staff and GPs, and have had a series of discussions with front line staff, who agreed a detailed action plan to address the fix phase of the turnaround team report. That is being developed. We have commenced discussions at the speciality level to identify and remove barriers to improving performance and to match medical staff capacity with patient demand, thus improving patient flows. We have commenced a capacity exercise that will better inform discussions with commissioners about future resource allocation. We have commenced a review of all systems associated with quality and safety, including a further analysis of key clinical indicators. We have developed a direct link from community to

support inreach and the management of frail elderly people and to simplify and standardise access to community services.

We have also established a joint partnership forum to bring our local GPs and trust clinical and professional leaders together. The first meeting has already been held, and regular meetings will follow. The aim is to strengthen the clinical voice in the design and delivery of services to create that environment where clinical staff lead services, supported by responsive management. It also aims to strengthen the day-to-day management of processes, including the development of daily performance metrics, which the senior team use to support daily management. That has already helped in terms of patient flows.

The improvement action group, which was established by the Health and Social Care Board, working with the Public Health Agency, in April 2012, will address excessive waiting times across the region with the aim of securing a step-change improvement in 12-hour and four-hour performance and in the patient experience. It was originally set up for a three-month period but the board extended its existence so that it could help emergency care services through the winter, when unscheduled care came under the greatest pressure.

Following the secondment of key members of the emergency department (ED) action group to the Northern Trust, the board is moving to a new phase of work to address ED performance which will focus on the completion of regional demand and the capacity work by the end of July, fortnightly performance meetings with trusts and a renewed focus on the key actions to improve the unscheduled care patient pathway.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he outline what signs of improvement he can identify already — he has mentioned some of them — in the Northern Trust? In particular, can he comment on whether the Northern Trust has made any progress on the issue of the employment of consultants, particularly at the Causeway Hospital?

Mr Poots: The teams and the work processes have been established. This is not purely about the emergency department at Antrim Area Hospital; it is about the Northern Trust. It is critically important to ensure that this is not just about a single issue; there must be comprehensive and wholesale improvement across the trust.

The Member has raised an issue about the consultant base at the Causeway Hospital. The course of work that has been identified will look at matching medical capacity to patient demand. We are looking at how we can do the other capacity exercise so that we can better inform our discussions with commissioners. That will enable us to have the appropriate support for the Causeway Hospital and its consultants, and to have the appropriate number of consultants at that facility over a range of services.

It is incredibly important — just to put it on record again — that the Causeway Hospital has a very strong future. It is absolutely necessary in order to provide quality services to the public in that area. We will give due attention to ensuring that we can continue to provide quality services in that part of Northern Ireland.

Mr Lunn: I want to follow on from Mr McCarthy's question. The Minister's answer appeared to be that the financial director of the Northern Trust had been moved on, so that was the problem solved. However, the Belfast Trust, for instance, has not signed its service and budget agreement for the past four years either. The South Eastern Trust has not done so for the past two years and the Southern and Western trusts did not sign theirs in 2011. So, how important are these agreements? There seems to be a slightly cavalier attitude to them, yet we are talking about sums, in the Belfast Trust, for example, of upwards of £900 million each year.

Mr Poots: The commissioners also have a significant role in all this. They commission services and the trusts deliver them. In all that, it is for the commissioners to identify the services that are required and for the trusts to provide those services. Medicine is a movable feast, and the best-laid plans do not always happen.

There is much that is unpredictable, so you need a degree of flexibility.

I expect service agreements to be signed, but more important is what happens on the ground and that, where possible, delivery should be close to people, while allowing that flexibility for the unexpected, which very often happens.

12.00 noon

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House today. He will be well aware of how critical I have been of the Northern Trust, certainly in respect of waiting

times at Antrim A&E. The Minister also knows that GPs will play an important role in tackling many of these issues. Will he, therefore, advise the House how important it is that there is better collaboration between GPs and the trust?

Mr Poots: It is critical, which is why we have established the partnership forum between GPs and the trusts' clinical professional leaders. The more that professionals engage with one another, identifying the issues for GPs and hospital services and how best they can be addressed, the greater the potential for positive outcomes. So I will encourage, support and, on some occasions, drive more collaboration between GPs and hospital clinicians so that we can identify and deliver the best outcomes for people.

Dr Brian Hunter was the chair of the Northern Trust's LCG and is now the GP medical director in the area, so he will assist us in ensuring that the GP voice is heard loud and clear in the Northern Trust area.

Mr G Robinson: I commend the Minister for his statement and ask him to tell us the responsibilities of the two senior directors. I also commend all staff in hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. They do sterling, life-saving work, and all should be commended for the excellent job that they do.

Mr Poots: The two senior directors who have been appointed have different roles to play. Paul Cummings is from a financial background, and his role will be overseeing corporate management and its functions and the service directorates. Mary Hinds will lead the improvement programme in the Antrim and Causeway hospitals and the related community services. In essence, Mary Hinds will largely be doing the front-line stuff. She will work with clinicians and other staff, engage with them, identify the issues and work to ensure that we have that improvement. Paul Cummings will deal with the financial and business side. Appointments, recruitment and so forth will fall to his side of the house. That will allow Mary Hinds to focus almost exclusively on ensuring that service improvement happens.

Mr Allister: The Minister's statement refers to "clear consequences for non-delivery", which undoubtedly would be good, but how does that fit with the relocation on the same salary of the failed chief executive of the Northern Trust to a job specially created for him in the Health and Social Care Board, for which no one else was eligible or allowed to apply? Does that not

sound more like a fix than a consequence of non-delivery?

Mr Poots: I make no apology for fixing things, particularly if they are broken. The truth is that I am not interested in going out to get people; I am interested in resolving problems. I identified that the problems in the Northern Trust pre-existed its creation. There were problems previously in the United, Causeway and Homefirst trusts before their amalgamation into the Northern Trust. It was a very difficult challenge. Now is not the appropriate time to be going out to damn people or to get people. Now is the time to focus on ensuring that we deliver the required quality of service for the people in North Antrim, South Antrim, East Antrim, North Belfast, Mid Ulster and East Londonderry who use the facilities provided by the Northern Trust. My concentration and focus is and will be on delivering the quality of services that people might expect.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. During March and April, the main accident and emergency units in Northern Ireland saw the lowest proportion of patients treated within four hours ever recorded. The figures show that one third of patients at Antrim Area Hospital are not seen within four hours and that, at the Causeway Hospital, it is about 30% of patients. How can the Minister be confident that we are seeing something more significant than the normal seasonal adjustment as we approach the summer months? How can he be sure that we are seeing significant improvement and changes and are starting to reach the 95% target that exists everywhere in the United Kingdom?

Mr Poots: We certainly did not see a normal seasonal period this year. For whatever reason, all the trusts were reporting a significant increase in the number of people attending hospital. There was a figure quoted to me of around 13%. It will always test and strain a facility when you get a higher number of more complex cases and many more admissions to hospitals. Our hospitals were under an awful lot of pressure, not so much in the early part of the winter but as we went into February, March and April. We have not quite come to an understanding of what has caused this or what the real problem has been, but we are very clear that there has been a significant increase in the number of people who have had to be admitted and the number of people who have been attending.

Hospitals have seen an increase in demand in April 2013 compared with the same period last

year, with some 59,259 new and unplanned emergency department attendances in April, which is an increase of 2,796 on the previous year. Attendances in the Northern Trust increased slightly between March and April from 10,602 to 10,829. The Northern Trust indicated that it has seen an increase in sustained pressure on the emergency departments in its hospitals in the past number of weeks. That has been exacerbated by outbreaks of vomiting and diarrhoea in seven local nursing homes, which has meant that the number of frail older people presenting at hospitals has increased. The trust's ability to discharge people back to those nursing homes has been affected by that.

This is all complex stuff; it is not easy. I challenge Members, when they talk about the trusts and the work that goes on in the facilities, to recognise that the people working in the trusts do not have an easy task. They need our support, sometimes, more than they need our criticism.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for the statement. Integrated care partnerships have the potential to enable earlier intervention and prevent more people from entering hospitals. When will they receive significant funds? That was not mentioned in the statement. Was there a reason for that?

Mr Poots: No, there is no reason for it; there will be a dozen of them up and running this month. I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who has just come in, for giving additional funds to ensure that Transforming Your Care can move forward and that integrated care partnerships can be established. We have put funding into the integrated care partnerships. I do not have the figure in front of me, but something tells me that it is around £3 million. That is a course of work that we are engaging in. We will ensure that those ICPs are up and running throughout Northern Ireland within the next nine months, but we expect to have a dozen of them operating this month.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 21/11-15] be agreed.

This debate follows the approval of the Supply resolution yesterday by the Assembly for the expenditure plans of Departments and other public bodies, as detailed in the 2013-14 Main Estimates. As Members will be fully aware, accelerated passage for the Bill is necessary to ensure the receipt of Royal Assent prior to the end of July. If the Bill did not proceed by accelerated passage and receive Assembly approval before the summer recess, Departments and other public bodies might have legal difficulty accessing cash and public services and would, therefore, be significantly affected prior to our return to the Chamber in September. I am glad to note that the Bill can be given accelerated passage because the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed that, in line with Standing Order 42, it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill. I thank the Committee for its agreement to the accelerated passage of the Bill.

I know that I did this yesterday during the Supply resolution debate, but I want to take a moment to make a call for agreement on the review of the financial process. It is a process that the Committee has long sought and that would reduce the number of times that we go over the same thing in the Assembly. It would also enable greater scrutiny of the Budget, which is really what we are about, and greater transparency. The review is an opportunity for the Executive and the Assembly to deliver a positive reform of direct rule-inherited publications and financial processes. I consider it an opportunity that we should not miss. I hope that that will be conveyed to the appropriate party and we can then free up the logjam that we have been experiencing for about a year and a half.

The Assembly's Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate should be confined to the general principles of the Bill. I shall endeavour to keep in that direction and encourage others to continue in that vein, as, I am sure, you will too, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The main purpose of the Bill is to make further provision of cash and resources for use on services, in addition to the Vote on Account provided in the Budget Act in March, up to the requirements of Departments and other public bodies set out in the Main Estimates for 2013-14. Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today. The 2013-14 Main Estimates were laid in the Assembly on 29 May.

The Bill will authorise the issue of a further £8,271,268,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £8,558,118,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services that are listed in column 1 of each schedule. Of course, these amounts are in addition to the Vote on Account passed by the Assembly in March, bringing the total amount of cash provided for 2013-14 to over £15 billion. In addition, the Bill sets, for the current financial year, a limit for each Department on the use of accruing resources. Accruing resources are current and capital receipts totalling £2,263,652,000. Therefore, the resources authorised in the Vote on Account in March and the resources and accruing resources now provided in this Bill bring the total resources for use by Departments in 2013-14 to over £18 billion. These amounts of resources include not only the departmental expenditure limits (DEL) on which our Budget process mainly focuses but the departmental demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME).

12.15 pm

Clause 2 provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £4,135,634,000, which is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 1(1) for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I must stress to the House that clause 2 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it enables the Department to run an effective and efficient cash management regime and ensures minimum drawdown of the Northern Ireland block grant on a daily basis. That is important when contemplating the daily borrowing by our Departments.

Finally, clause 5 removes from the statute book three Budget Acts from 2010 that are no longer operative.

The Budget Bill is, admittedly, technical, and, on the surface, it can be hard to translate the

figures into real-world public services. However, it is important to emphasise that every doctor and teacher, every road improvement, every hospital and every public service provided for under the authority of the Assembly is affected by the Bill and requires this legislation to operate legally in this financial year. Although it may appear dry and unimportant, and perhaps the figures seem a bit surreal, it is, in effect, crucial legislation for our public services. On that note, I will conclude, and I will be happy to deal with any points of principle or detail on the Budget Bill that Members raise during the debate.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As was outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect departmental spending plans in the 2013-14 Main Estimates. Those are based on year 3 of the former Executive's Budget 2011-15, which was approved in the Assembly's previous mandate.

As on previous occasions, the Department of Finance and Personnel has highlighted the potential consequences for departmental spending should the Bill not progress through the Assembly before the summer recess. Budget Bills sometimes include provision to regularise excess cash and resources incurred by Departments, as was the case around this time last year, and I am pleased to note that, for this period, such a mechanism is not required, since no excesses have been reported.

The Committee took evidence from departmental officials, and, on behalf of the Committee, I acknowledge the work of the officials and thank them for their prompt responses to the queries posed by us. The evidence from the Department has provided explanations for a series of allocations, reductions, technical adjustments and transfers that have been made since the budget allocations were initially set out in Budget 2011-15. As I said during yesterday's Supply resolution debate, the Committee has agreed to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill under Standing Order 42(2) on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the Bill's expenditure provisions.

During yesterday's debate, I also highlighted the importance of scrutiny by all Statutory Committees of departmental financial forecasting and out-turn data. Detailed and regular monitoring of the financial performance of Departments will enable Committees to identify issues in real time and to obtain

assurances that the necessary corrective or preventative action will be taken. If the figures for the prior year forecast out-turn are made available to the Finance Committee in good time for its consideration of the Main Estimates, it will, in turn, be in a position to share those figures with other Statutory Committees, which could further inform the Supply resolution debate.

As I also mentioned yesterday, the Committee is taking forward work in collaboration with the Department to develop a memorandum of understanding on the Budget process that, in conjunction with other measures, should help to improve the Budget and financial processes and related parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. Such measures will ensure that the Assembly and its Committees can add real value to the Budget process and ensure that they are afforded the time and information to enable them to undertake constructive scrutiny and exercise influence at the most appropriate stages in the process.

At a strategic level, more effective Assembly input to and scrutiny of the Executive's Budget and expenditure will help to further demonstrate that devolution is making a difference in delivering accountable, responsive and efficient governance in the North. This will represent positive steps forward, but, where the immediate business before us is concerned, on behalf of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I support the Bill's general principles.

I will make a few comments from a party perspective, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. We need to ensure that we put a focus on the economy, and this Budget and this Programme for Government have certainly done that. Last week, I attended a CBI event with the Finance Minister in waiting, and it was good to hear the positive messages coming from that economic report.

Of course, part of the allocation in the OFMDFM budget is £5.5 million for community relations. We need to make the link between community relations and the hard issues that face us and the economy. That is a challenge for us. How do we deal with the hard issues of flags, parades and the past? Those are all having an immediate impact on communities' quality of life and prosperity. The danger is that, once again, these issues will go off the radar come September and October and will be forgotten until next year. So, given that, I welcome the setting up of the all-party group. There is an onus on it and whoever is

appointed as its Chair to come up with something that is universally challenging.

I read an article by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week. I did not agree with a lot of what he said, but he indicated that he was up for difficult conversations. He was right to make that point. We will find no solutions to these issues without difficult conversations, and that goes for Sinn Féin as much as for the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party. The economy and the issues of culture, identity and the past are very much intertwined whether we like it or not, and we need to figure out how to take a collective and a mature approach to ensure that those issues, which dog us on occasions in the House, do not have a detrimental effect on people's quality of life, on communities and, ultimately, on the economy. We need to realise that and act on those, because they are having a big impact on the economy.

Sue Ramsey, the Chair of the Health Committee, referred yesterday to Transforming Your Care and the costs of implementing it. She referred to it having been allocated £70 million for 2011-15. It is important that we have the right money in health to implement the right policies. At a UNISON meeting that was organised in Ballycastle last week, there was much discussion about the closure of Rathmoyle residential care home, which is still causing huge distress and anxiety for those connected to it. At this stage, they do not buy in to the idea that everything will be rosy in the garden post Transforming Your Care. According to the trust, the closure of Rathmoyle will proceed, whereas the Department gave the impression that the process was suspended for all the residential care homes. Ballycastle has not got a stay of execution, and the mixed messages from the Department and the Northern Trust need to stop, because they are having a great impact on the people who live in those homes and on their families. Clearly, the Department wants to make budget savings by nudging older people into the private sector, but "At what cost?", I wonder.

The Fire Service comes under the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and has a resource allocation of £335 million. Quite shortly, the House will be looking at proposals to save money on public service pensions. The retirement age of firefighters will be one issue that will come up. That will be subject to some debate here, as it was across the water. That debate has focused on the fitness requirements of firefighters and on the lack of back-office roles in the service where older staff may go, given their own fitness

performance as they approach the end of their career. That is something that we need to look closely at, and we need to try to make savings in all areas. However, sometimes the financial cost is not worth the effect that it will have on the service. It is critical that we look at that issue in detail and that the service level of firefighters be upheld.

Just over £7 million is allocated to the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, which will be working with a development opportunity of international significance. Of course, there have been many naysayers about that project, one of whom is not with us at the moment. However, the site has the potential to create 5,000 jobs, ensuring that we get £300 million worth of investment. It is 347 acres of potential development, and there is the opportunity to create 2,000 jobs in the construction sector alone. I do not believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth. We need to get a move on with the project. It has huge potential to impact on our employment figures and to improve things in the construction sector. We need to look at it through an economic prism, as opposed to a narrow political one.

The A26 is a key route through north Antrim, and the upgrade of the Glarryford to Drones Road section of the route is of huge importance in reducing travel times and improving road safety, especially for those who commute from Ballymoney and Ballycastle. There is still some work to be done on that, as the Finance Minister indicated yesterday. I am keen to see that work processed and allocated as soon as possible. Of course, if you look at it from a wider perspective, the Glarryford to Coleraine part of the route is the only part of the road from Coleraine to Cork that is not dualled. Dualling it will certainly cut down travel time for commuters and for the great hurling fraternity that we have in north Antrim, heading down country every week from Cú Chulainn's, Shamrocks, Carey, Armoy and McQuillan's, who will greatly benefit. Of course, the main issue has to be the huge loss of life that we have seen on the Frosses Road section of the A26 over many years. We do not want to see that happen again. The sooner that project is brought to the fore and processed, the sooner it will be beneficial.

We need to see funding for fire stations, particularly in rural areas. I have just been passed a note from the good Member from East Antrim about the need for a fire station in Cushendall. That has been campaigned for for many years. Perhaps it is an indication that some people take the view that, because it is in the Department of Health, the Fire Service sometimes gets forgotten about, and that has a

big impact in acutely rural areas such as Cushendall, Ballycastle and the north coast. Those areas are quite cut off from the Fire Service and mobile phone coverage. We need to go that extra mile sometimes for those rural areas to ensure that they get the same quality of service as anywhere else.

I conclude on that note, and I urge Members to support the Bill as introduced.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension, so I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must tell Members that questions 2 and 12 have been withdrawn.

Youth Justice

1. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the youth justice system, how many young people have received warnings or prosecutions in the last three years. (AQO 4259/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): In the past three years, 8,759 young people have been brought before the youth court in relation to criminal offences. In the same period, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) has directed diversionary disposals in respect of 7,732 young people and the PSNI has dealt with 7,690 young people by way of a discretionary disposal. There has been a downward trend in both PPS diversion and court prosecution across the three-year period. That may be attributable to the greater use of police discretionary disposals, which were introduced in May 2010. Overall, the number of young people coming into contact with the justice system has reduced.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for those figures. They clearly indicate that discretion is becoming the norm when it comes to dealing with the youth. I do not know whether the Minister has the figures with him, but will he indicate whether that is being successful in the longer term in diverting youths away from a permanent criminal record and, unfortunately, taking up a lot of time in the criminal justice system?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Craig for his supplementary question. On the basis that the scheme has been in operation for only three years so far, I do not think that it is possible to forecast the long-term engagement. There is no doubt that academic research and evidence from elsewhere suggests that by diverting young people from formal engagement with the justice system, if they get involved at a relatively minor level, it is likely to be very positive in ensuring that they remain out of the crime scene in the future. However, we will

need to wait a few years to get hard evidence on the scheme.

Mr P Ramsey: I will follow on from the Member for Lagan Valley. Will the Minister outline to the House any indications or measurable outcomes of the existing schemes on diversionary actions across Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question, but I am afraid I am going to have to say no. It is difficult to give measurable outcomes at this early stage. We know that, when discretionary disposals are engaged in elsewhere, they have a habit of ensuring that young people do not get engaged in serious criminal activity. That is in line with some of the other good work that we have seen, for example, on reducing antisocial behaviour over the same three-year period.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. How many young people have been the subject of a fixed penalty notice, and what is the Minister's assessment of the scheme?

Mr Ford: I do not think that I have specific figures before me for young people who have received a fixed penalty notice, Mr Deputy Speaker. The fixed penalty schemes for the seven offences that were introduced on the basis of the first Justice Act are still at a relatively early stage. However, I am happy to provide the Member with figures when I get them to give him the full detail so far.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As I said, question 2 has been withdrawn.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships

3. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the effectiveness of policing and community safety partnerships. (AQO 4261/11-15)

10. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the progress made by the police and community safety partnerships in their first year of operation. (AQO 4268/11-15)

Mr Ford: With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 10 together.

Policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) have now been operational for just over a year, working to ensure a more joined-up approach to policing and community safety

issues and making a real difference on the ground by delivering local solutions to local problems.

Some very good work has already taken place, including a range of initiatives aimed at tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. Good examples include the midnight street soccer initiative in Castlereagh, which has given teenagers the opportunity to attend a programme incorporating good relations workshops focusing on themes such as addressing racism and antisocial behaviour; and the Dreamscheme programme, which involves teenagers from six areas in Castlereagh in an intergenerational programme with senior citizens.

Other examples include the launch by Lisburn PCSP of a rural farm watch scheme that has improved communications with the farming community and the wider rural community. Lisburn PCSP has also worked with the other PCSPs in D district on the development of an app as an engagement tool for young people in the area. The app contains useful information for young people on keeping on the right side of the law. I was pleased to be able to attend its launch in Antrim two weeks ago.

There has also been significant work to help strengthen public confidence in policing, and PCSP public engagement events have provided the opportunity for the local community to address their concerns to the police and the PCSP. A major strength of PCSPs is the diversity of their membership. The involvement of political and independent members, as well as representatives of the seven designated statutory bodies, is helping to maximise those opportunities for effective partnership working.

The very positive work that has been done over the past year will now be built upon through the implementation of the plans developed for 2013-15. Those are based on evidence gathered from community engagement and a comprehensive strategic assessment by each PCSP of the needs of its locality.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his reply. I agree with the sentiments that he expressed about PCSPs. A little money in some of the schemes that he mentioned — Dreamscheme, midnight soccer and stuff like that — leads to very good work in many areas.

Community safety partnerships have been able to access money recovered from proceeds of crime, which has been very effective. I think of the Dundonald area, where computers were installed on a bus that goes around hot spots

each evening. Does the Minister see that continuing and will he assure us that money will continue to be recovered from the proceeds of crime?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Spratt for his positive words. It is certainly the intention that PCSPs will continue to be able to draw on assets recovery money. The issue is that we are never quite sure how much there will be from year to year, which creates management issues, but I hope that we will shortly publish plans for dealing with the scheme. We will revise it in light of how it has operated in the first two years to ensure the best possible focus for that expenditure.

Mr Lunn: From a Policing Board perspective, the feedback on PCSPs has been entirely positive so far. They are definitely making a real contribution to local communities. Can the Minister tell us anything about potential amendments to the appointment process for PCSPs, which has been generally regarded as being not totally satisfactory?

Mr Ford: I appreciate the point that my colleague makes. The process for the appointment of members, specifically independent members, has largely followed the previous arrangements for district policing partnerships (DPPs). We will have to see what comes forward from the work being done by the joint committee to review a number of aspects of the working of PCSPs. There is a feeling that, to some extent, it is still a significantly bureaucratic process, and we could do with some efforts to streamline it. We need to ensure that we get a fully representative PCSP that is capable of addressing the needs of its area. The positive news is the good work that is being seen to be done by the PCSPs, but we need to ensure that the background is right to keep that going.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to keep their questions short and concise.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. Following up on the themes that were expanded on by Mr Spratt about the effectiveness of the engagement of the PCSPs with the community, are there any broad thematic areas of strategic direction where support can be provided by the Department, whether it is through the plans that the Minister referred to, or whatever measure, to ensure that there is much more meaningful engagement with the communities that they represent?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McGlone for that equally short question. The difficulty that he poses for me is that it is almost a question of whether there should be more central direction from the Department on how PCSPs should operate. I am a firm believer in allowing communities to develop local solutions to deal with local problems. On that basis, I am reluctant to have an excessively prescriptive regime. We hope to see the continuation of PCSPs working well within the general community safety strategy. I believe that that is the case, but it is important that each PCSP work out how best to engage with its local community. At the same time, we encourage PCSPs to share best practice.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that the strength of a PCSP is the local knowledge and the range of local resources in the statutory and voluntary sector to address local issues and that, collectively, they can frequently address antisocial behaviour, which policing is, perhaps, having difficulty addressing? How does he assess whether a PCSP is not working effectively and assist it to become more effective?

Mr Ford: I agree with Mr Beggs's fundamental point. When PCSPs were established, we hoped that the existing community safety work would be allied to the work of the DPPs and that that would ensure a full partnership with the range of organisations. The key issue is that there was not merely an expectation that police should solve the problems. Assessing effectiveness is, to some extent, the work of the joint committee as it looks to see, in particular, the level of public satisfaction with the work of PCSPs. There will be issues with how PCSPs produce their annual reports and how that shows that they are dealing with issues. I suspect that we will also probably hear from local groups that feel that not enough is being done by their PCSP if the negative is the case, although, thankfully, we have heard little of that so far.

Criminal Justice: Fixed-term Contracts

4. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Justice to outline how often fixed-term contracts are awarded by criminal justice agencies without having been openly advertised and without having regard to the merit principle. (AQO 4262/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since the DOJ was created in April 2010, 13 fixed-term contracts have been awarded by my Department, its agencies and arm's-length bodies, other than the Police

Service, without being openly advertised. The PSNI has awarded 22 fixed-term contracts. Of those, 13 were not openly advertised, involving 11 individuals. The PSNI has provided information to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) inquiry into the PSNI's use of agency staff. The PAC is expected to publish its report in the coming months, and I believe it would be appropriate to await that report.

I would expect fair and open competition to be the norm in the justice sector. Occasionally, it may be necessary to rely on specific expertise to deliver justice business. In my Department, Forensic Science made one such appointment to help to respond to the workload resulting from dissident activity. The Northern Ireland Policing Fund appointed a chair of the board and reappointed six directors. Those were all advertised internally in accordance with its articles of association as a company limited by guarantee. The Northern Ireland Law Commission appointed two individuals, as specific expertise was required to ensure continuity in ongoing projects. The Northern Ireland Policing Board made three appointments relating to its appointment of a human rights adviser.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the Minister aware that the PSNI has engaged in the practice, even in recent times, of rehiring retired police officers for unadvertised, well-paid jobs? Does he agree that, in order to open doors to newcomers, the PSNI needs to shut the revolving door?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Milne for his question but I am not aware of the PSNI rehiring officers in the way that he described. The appointment of agency staff is a different issue from the specific issue of rehiring. That is the subject of the PAC inquiry, and I look forward to seeing its report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling the next Member, I urge you, please, to keep the questions short. Moreover, supplementary questions should not be read.

DOJ: G8 Summit

5. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Justice for the anticipated costs to his Department of staging the G8 summit. (AQO 4263/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI and departmental officials continue to work on the forecast cost of the

policing and security operation associated with the G8 summit. The total cost to my Department will not be known until some time after the summit, as some costs, such as compensation claims and legal aid, will be incurred after the event and will be dependent on the level of unrest experienced.

I welcome the Chief Constable's report to the Policing Board last Thursday. He advised that he had received a letter from Danny Alexander, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, giving assurance that the vast majority of the cost of the policing operation will be met by the Government. The PSNI will bear the cost of the purchases and developments that were already built into policing spending plans, some of which have been accelerated as part of the G8 operation.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister confirm the existence of a PSNI business case for the G8 that includes figures like £4.2 million for the security fence? Does the Department of Justice have its own business case for the summit?

Mr Ford: I thank Mrs Dobson. I am not sure that it would be beneficial to go through in this place all the individual costs, most of which are the responsibility of the UK Government, given that it is 10 Downing Street and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that are organising the summit. However, I can assure her that appropriate business cases have been prepared for anything that falls within the remit of the DOJ.

Mr Givan: This is an issue that the Justice Committee sought answers to only last week, and the official refused to tell us. Can the Minister give us an estimate of the overall cost associated with the G8 and what proportion of that is expected to be borne by the Department of Justice and the PSNI?

2.15 pm

Mr Ford: I thank my Committee Chair for his usual inquisition. The reality is that I cannot give a forecast of what the overall cost will be, because there are sufficiently many undetermined factors and factors that will not be determined until significantly after the conference is over. What I can say is that a sum of money will fall to the PSNI and, hence, to the DOJ. That money is related to expenditure that will already have been in train, for example, for a variety of capital programmes that have been accelerated slightly to enable the policing operation to function well during the

G8 conference. Those are issues on which we would have been expending money otherwise. However, as I have said to the House, we have seen the letter that was sent by the Chief Secretary to the Chief Constable, and that makes clear the expectation that the funding, other than that for accelerated spending, will fall to the UK Exchequer and not to the DOJ.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister give some indication of the quantum of the capital costs that are associated purely with staging the G8? Can he also give an assurance that there will be no revenue difficulties for the police going forward?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Byrne for his question. However, I am always reluctant to say that there will be no revenue difficulties for policing costs, when we look at the kind of events that can happen on the streets and when we do not yet know what it will cost for policing experience for the number of special events happening this summer, as well as the usual issues around parading. Therefore I am very cautious about saying that there will be no pressure on the police in that respect. I am assured that the key additional costs for G8 are being fully funded elsewhere, but, as we look at a difficult financial situation for this year, we will ensure that we do our best to get the best value for money from the DOJ expenditure.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister may be aware that the Scottish Parliament is still trying to recoup some of the moneys from the costs incurred eight years ago at Gleneagles. Can he give an assurance that that will not be repeated after next week's conference?

Mr Ford: It would be a foolish man who would give the prediction that Mr Lynch is asking for. However, I can say that I believe that we have better assurances from the Treasury than perhaps was the case. It would also probably be reasonable to say that working relationships between DFP and the Treasury in that particular role and between DOJ, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are better than they perhaps were between elements of the Scottish Government and the UK Government eight years ago. I am not sure that I would wish to fall into the trap of getting too closely led on what happened after Gleneagles.

Director of Public Prosecutions: Offences Against the Person Act 1861

6. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice if he will consider making provision to enable the Director of Public Prosecutions to appeal the leniency of sentences under section 20 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. (AQO 4264/11-15)

Mr Ford: Without questioning the circumstances of any individual offence, I am unaware of any particular public concern around sentencing in respect of offences under section 20 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and I have no current plans for review.

Section 20 of the Act makes it an offence to wound or cause grievous bodily harm. The section 20 offence is what is known as a hybrid offence, which can be tried in a Magistrates' Court or the Crown Court. For such an offence to be subject to appeal by way of unduly lenient sentencing legislation, it must be specifically listed in statute, and the section 20 offence is not currently included.

The seriousness accorded to the section 20 offence was, however, demonstrated by an increase in the maximum penalty on indictment from five years to seven years in 2004. I should add that the more serious section 18 offence of grievous bodily harm with intent is referable as unduly lenient, because it is an indictable-only offence.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister consider an amendment under fairer, faster justice to make provision for an appeal in relation to a conviction relating to domestic abuse?

Mr Ford: I can only repeat to Mr Boylan that, whilst he may have a point around the issue of domestic abuse, we would need to ensure that there was sufficient evidence to justify it. At the moment, a significant number of section 20 offences are tried in the Crown Court on indictment. Only one third of such offences are tried in the Magistrates' Court. I think that that is a recognition by the Public Prosecution Service of the seriousness of many of those offences. If there is specific evidence of where, he feels, that system has broken down, I would be very happy to receive it from him.

Mr Kinahan: Can the Minister update the House on the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Lord Chief Justice following the report of his sentencing group?

Mr Ford: I am not sure precisely which recommendations Mr Kinahan is referring to. I am happy to look at any further detail he may wish to give me. The issue of some matters that are being considered for referral as unduly lenient is out for consultation. Those matters relate to a number of issues around excise offences. If there are other offences he wants to make suggestions about, I will happily hear from him.

Mr Rogers: Health service employees are assaulted in the course of their duty. How is that service reflected in sentencing policy?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Rogers for the question because the issue of specifically creating offences that relate to assaults on health service staff or other public servants has been addressed during the past three years. The reality is that there is provision under sentencing guidance for judges to take into account the circumstances in which an assault takes place. That can include issues such as whether somebody is performing a public service as well as issues such as the vulnerability of the victim. I believe that that guidance is in place. The issue of how it is applied in any individual case is, clearly, not for me, but I believe that, in general terms, the provision is there.

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Justice if he plans to privatise the Court Service along the lines proposed by his Westminster counterpart. (AQO 4265/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have no plans to privatise the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister take the opportunity to affirm that the independence of the judiciary is far more important than saving money and that no price can be put on that cornerstone of our freedom and constitution?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Gardiner that the independence of the judiciary is crucial. I am always reluctant to say that no price can be put on any aspect of the justice system, given that we have a limited, finite budget. However,

the key point that he makes — to ensure that the courts and tribunals work best in the interests of providing justice — underpins the work that we do in DOJ.

Human Trafficking Action Plan

8. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Justice what discussions took place with agencies on the island of Ireland in the formulation of the annual human trafficking action plan. (AQO 4266/11-15)

Mr Ford: The first annual human trafficking action plan for Northern Ireland was published on 23 May. That action plan is an important step forward and maps out a clear direction of travel in tackling the appalling crime of human trafficking.

I recognise the need to work in collaboration with other partners if we are to provide an effective response to human trafficking. Therefore the action plan was developed in partnership with, amongst others, the statutory bodies represented on the immigration and human trafficking subgroup of the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) and the non-governmental organisations represented on the engagement group on human trafficking.

The plan reflects the Northern Ireland response to human trafficking, but it also takes account of the wider context of human trafficking across the whole of the UK and Ireland. For example, the United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre and an Garda Síochána are each represented on the OCTF subgroup and have been involved in the development of the action plan. In addition, a number of the NGOs represented on the engagement group operate on an all-Ireland basis.

I regularly meet the Irish Minister for Justice and Equality. My officials continue to liaise closely with officials in the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE) to identify opportunities for cross-border collaboration. The action plan has been shared with that Department. Obviously, a number of the issues have a cross-border element. My Department also plans to co-host a cross-border forum on human trafficking later this year in partnership with DJE that will bring together statutory agencies and NGOs to facilitate better co-operation and partnership working across both jurisdictions.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank

the Minister for his answer. I welcome his remarks on cross-border co-operation, but I do not see them reflected in the action plan. Does the Minister agree that, in order to act comprehensively against human traffickers, there needs to be a fully joined-up all-island approach to the matter? Failure to do so is a disservice to victims.

Mr Ford: I agree with Ms McCorley about the need for a joined-up plan. Our plan is a Northern Ireland plan that, I believe, correctly takes account of cross-border and UK-wide issues. We are in a particular position in this region, and we need to take account of what is happening south and east of us. I think that we are seeing that happen, and I believe that some of the practical work being done through, for example, the interministerial group on human trafficking, which meets in London, and the North/South work that I do with Alan Shatter and colleagues in Dublin shows that we are getting that joining up without doing anything other than saying that this action plan is the plan for Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: What resources do you have in place for the provision of aftercare for women and others who have been rescued? Do you believe that the resources you have are adequate to meet the forecasted need?

Mr Ford: I thank Mrs Kelly for her question, although she strayed a little beyond the specific issue of the plan. I believe that, in simple terms, the resources required are all available. Clearly, they operate in different ways. For example, DHSSPS has specific responsibilities for children, and Edwin Poots can answer for those. In respect of the other work that we do, I believe that engaging with NGOs that provide aftercare for adult victims meets the needs that exist. That will certainly be kept under review if those needs increase.

Mr Newton: Can the Minister confirm that one of the major problems for those taken into aftercare is not the pressure exerted on them in Northern Ireland but the pressure exerted on them or their family in their country of origin, from which they were trafficked? Has the Minister given any consideration to that aspect by working with the jurisdictions in those foreign countries?

Mr Ford: Mr Newton highlights a significant point: there is absolutely no doubt that many people are put under pressure, including threats to their family in the country from which they originated. However, I fear that, if I were to go any further in talking about engagement with

those countries, I would stray outside my responsibilities as a devolved Minister and into responsibilities that lie elsewhere. I certainly engage around those issues when I attend the interministerial group on human trafficking led by the Home Office.

Police: Injury-on-duty Awards

9. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the review of injury-on-duty awards for police officers. (AQO 4267/11-15)

Mr Ford: I appreciate that this is an important issue that may be a cause of concern for former police officers. Under regulation 35(1) of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Police Service of Northern Ireland Reserve (Injury Benefit) Regulations 2006, the responsibility for arranging reviews of an award lies with the Policing Board. Sam Pollock, the chief executive, wrote to me regarding the current Policing Board policy on reviews of injury-on-duty awards. He advised that an injury-on-duty working group had been set up to discuss issues raised by representatives of the Police Federation, the Retired Police Officers' Association and the Disabled Police Officers Association. My officials currently participate in that working group to offer support, clarify the legislative provision and address any concerns that fall within the remit of my Department.

I understand that the working group intends to present its findings by the end of this month. The Policing Board has taken the decision to suspend all reviews until the working group has completed its discussions. I await the outcome of that work with interest. I anticipate that I will be able to provide a more informed and substantive response when I have had sight of the working group's findings.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his answer. On behalf of former police officers who have had a level of pension rights because of their medical conditions — in the past, those conditions have been described as permanent, but they now appear to be in the process of being reduced — can I ask whether "permanent" no longer means permanent? Further to that, can the Minister support the discontinuation of the current review?

Mr Ford: No; I cannot support the discontinuation because it is not my position to do so. That matter lies quite properly with the Policing Board, and I await the outcome of the review.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Chris Lyttle. I am sorry; Mr Chris Lyttle is not in his place, so we will move on to Mr Mickey Brady.

2.30 pm

Maximising Access in Rural Areas

2. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the benefits of the maximising access in rural areas project in tackling rural poverty. (AQO 4274/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As you know, the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) project is an initiative based on the premise that visiting people in their own homes and using a personal touch encourages them to avail themselves of services and grants that they would not otherwise have known about or known where to apply to. Phase 1 of the project ran from October 2009 to March 2011 and provided visits by locally trained enablers to over 4,000 vulnerable rural households. Those households were identified by local people, such as members of community and voluntary groups, postmen, district nurses and GPs, all of whom worked in small, localised project teams. For the 4,135 households that were visited, just over 10,000 referrals were generated to advice agencies and the Social Security Agency for benefit entitlement checks; the warm homes scheme and sustainable energy programmes to address fuel poverty issues; to rural community transport partnerships and Translink for a SmartPass to address transport and access issues; to local councils to receive home safety checks; and to the Housing Executive to receive disabled facilities grants. There were also referrals to local and regional statutory community and voluntary organisations so that people could receive or avail themselves of regional services.

An independent post-project evaluation included a social return on investment that estimated that £8.62 benefit was leveraged from every £1 invested in the project. Phase 2 aims to visit 12,000 households by April 2015 and to build on the learning from phase 1 by integrating an automated questionnaire and referral system and including second visits to support households. Anyone who feels that they know of a household that could benefit from such a visit should let us know, as this

project is having a significant positive impact on our vulnerable rural households.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I had a supplementary question asking her to detail the success of phase 1, but she has already given some detail on that. However, she may want to elaborate.

Mrs O'Neill: Phase 1 has been very successful, and we hope that phase 2 will allow us to build on that further. I am committed to our being able to reach so many vulnerable and isolated people. I welcome the cross-departmental support that allows us to do that.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Has she had any discussions with the Minister of Education to ensure that rural poverty does not extend to education provision?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my initial answer, a lot of the projects are about households. It is about going door to door and reaching marginalised and isolated people who may not know where to go to access services. In the initial stages, it is about signposting, but that leads on to people getting help. One benefit of the project will be that a second call will be made to make sure that people received help. Education is not the focus; it is about access to benefits and rural issues, but the enablers will be happy to assist with any issues that people present to them when they call. They will then ensure that people know where to go to get the help that they need. The beauty of phase 2 is that enablers will go back to check that people got help.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give her assessment of the differing levels of rural poverty in the west of Northern Ireland compared with the east?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have statistics with me, but suffice it to say that, given the nature of the west and its rural population, people often live in marginalised and isolated areas. The Executive are mindful of that, and the fact that we have Executive agreement to bring forward these initiatives is a positive step for people in the west who, simply by the nature of the geography of where they live, are isolated and should be targeted. I am pleased with the work not only of the MARA project but of the wider tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework, which is working towards targeting those people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Michaela Boyle is not in her place to ask question 3.

Rural Development Programme: Wind Turbines

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the environmental impact of wind turbines in rural areas that are funded through the rural development programme. (AQO 4276/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: So far, axis 3 of the rural development programme has offered grant assistance for 56 feasibility studies for wind turbines and the installation of 33 turbines. A further five wind turbines are being installed as part of larger projects, and the joint council committees have approved a further eight feasibility studies and six installation applications for funding. The majority of these are for farmers diversifying to become energy producers and thereby supplementing their farm income. As an added benefit, the energy created in the process is reducing the carbon footprint. Rural community projects are also being taken forward, which will help to reduce the financial burden on community groups in the current economic climate while reducing their carbon footprint. Every project funded by my Department must have a feasibility study undertaken that includes environmental considerations and an assessment of its viability.

Additionally, as part of the local action group (LAG) assessment process, the environmental impact is considered, as it is for all funding applications. I am keen to support renewable technology as a way for rural dwellers to reduce the amount of money that they have to spend on electricity and to give them a new income stream, particularly given recent rises in the cost of electricity.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline her support for other renewable technologies?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, and I thank the Member for his question. Back in September last year, I reopened the Department's biomass processing challenge fund (BPCF) for a second tranche. That funds support for renewable energy technologies that are fuelled by biomass, including biomass boilers and anaerobic digesters. Nineteen projects have received letters indicating that they qualify for the award of a grant. The majority of energy produced by BPCF-supported installations must be produced on the farm in direct support of agricultural activities. I support on-farm anaerobic digestion

as a means by which farmers can utilise their farm resources efficiently and ensure that they have access to a secure supply of clean fuel.

Grant awards under the scheme are provided at a rate of 40% of total project costs, up to the sterling equivalent of €400,000. Projects claiming payments under the renewables obligation certificate (ROC) scheme for producing renewable electricity will have a deduction applied to their grant award.

Mrs Dobson: The Minister will no doubt be aware of the significant concerns with which wind turbines, especially wind farms, are usually met in local communities. Although I welcome the support that her Department offers through projects through LAGs, will she detail the role that she believes local communities should play in deciding appropriate locations for their composition?

Mrs O'Neill: I am broadly in support of renewable energies and encouraging people to move towards using them. However, proper strategic planning needs to be at the core. Those things should not just be imposed on communities without their views being sought. Although some of the projects look towards giving some sort of incentive to local communities, sometimes that is not enough. In Scotland, the benefits to local communities seem to be a lot more favourable. As I said, although I am broadly supportive of renewable energy, projects should not be imposed on communities. There should be proper planning at the core of a project. If companies want to offer benefits to communities, those should be maximised, because electricity costs are very high. If there are benefits at all for local communities, those should be fully exploited.

Lord Morrow: What joined-up thinking and collaboration is there between the Minister's Department and the Department of the Environment (DOE) on the provision of wind turbines?

Mrs O'Neill: That is obviously a cross-cutting issue, and it is an ongoing discussion at officials' level. I have also had discussions with the Minister of the Environment. My Department has its renewable energy action plan, which was consulted on with DOE. DOE is key in all of this. I am coming at it from the potential for the farming community to be able to install renewable energy projects that will assist it in the longer term. That is the angle from which I am coming at it. Officials and I regularly engage with DOE on wind farms in general. One of the other areas that I have

been exploring is wind farms on Forest Service land. However, DOE is firmly in the lead.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Will she outline what farming-related criteria are used to assess grant aid applications for single wind turbines on farms?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very happy to provide the breakdown of the detail to the Member in writing. That is assessed through the access support system that is in place. People get funding from the Department under measure 3.1 of the rural development programme, which is on diversification.

Agri-Food Strategy Board: 'Going for Growth'

5. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what financial support she intends to provide to primary producers to help them to reach the targets identified in the Agri-Food Strategy Board's 'Going for Growth' action plan. (AQO 4277/11-15)

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the call in the 'Going for Growth' report for the introduction of a farm business improvement scheme. (AQO 4279/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together. I welcome the launch of the Agri-Food Strategy Board's report and, in particular, its visions for a single, sustainable, profitable and integrated supply chain. I also welcome the board's recognition of the need for a strong, sustainable producer supply base.

Central to delivering a sustainable supply base is a proposal to introduce a £250 million farm business improvement scheme for producers who are committed to market-focused business development. I welcome that proposal and believe that such a scheme will improve productivity and efficiency at farm level. Provided that the necessary funding can be secured, I believe that we can deliver such a scheme. However, as you are all aware, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I have only recently received the report, and we are now taking time to carefully consider each of the recommendations before bringing forward final proposals on this and other recommendations to the Executive.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for her response. The Minister has a substantial underspend in axis 3 of the rural development programme. What plans does she have to use that money to help achieve the targets set out in the report and to increase profitability in farms across Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that I have a major programme of work ongoing for any potential underspend in axis 3. I am committed to making sure that, by the end of the programme, not one penny will be handed back to Europe and that each penny of European money that has been secured will be spent to the best effect in rural communities. I am very much committed to that. I brought forward a strategic projects initiative that has been very successful. It is still early days, but it has been very successful in assessing the projects that have come forward. I believe that we will spend all that money by the end of the programme.

I believe that the new rural development programme will be an excellent vehicle that will allow us to bring forward many initiatives that will meet the recommendations in the report. We are involved in consultations, so it is very timely that we have received the report now. It will feed into the discussions around shaping the new rural development programme. The publication of the report and the fact that we are consulting on the new programme is all good timing.

I definitely believe that the new rural development programme will be an excellent vehicle in the time ahead. However, as I said, it is still early days in considering the recommendations. Although the report is very challenging, I think that it is very doable. There are quite a lot of positive elements in it that the industry, Minister Foster and I welcome.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Will the Minister give me a timetable for the implementation of the report?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we received the report only recently and are working our way through each of the recommendations. Some recommendations are, I think, quite simple and easy to implement and others are a bit more long term. There are short-term, medium-term and long-term objectives to be met.

A number of challenges and recommendations have been laid down in the report that are directed towards my Department, the

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning. We need a proper, full and frank Executive exchange of views once everybody has had a chance to fully digest the report and look towards the next steps. My intention is that the work will be done over the next number of months, and that I will bring an implementation plan to the Executive early in the autumn for discussion and, hopefully, for sign off.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Will she state whether DARD is in a position to provide the £250 million for the farm business improvement scheme that Mr O'Neill has asked for, if possible within the first three or four years of the strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: I will maybe start in reverse. It is not just Mr O'Neill who is asking for it; it is the whole strategy board, which, I would point out, reflects the whole supply chain, from the farmers through to the processors and retailers. That is one of the beauties of the report, which I know the Member acknowledges.

The recommendation for the £250 million is one recommendation among quite a number that we are trying to work our way through. I think that the money being asked for is doable. The money that the board have asked for from the Executive, and the leverage that that would bring in from the industry, would bring fantastic benefits. In my opinion, it is doable, and I look forward to going to the Executive with the plans after I have had discussions with all the relevant Ministers. I hope to get agreement and sign off on that early in the autumn.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm whether her Department has made a bid in the June monitoring round to make a start on securing some of the finances required under the 'Going for Growth' document? If not, why not?

2.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: No, I did not make a bid in the June monitoring round because it would not be appropriate at this stage. We are talking about significant investment; it is not something that you could take up from a June monitoring round. We need to be a wee bit more strategic about it. As I said, we are working our way through all the recommendations. Some things are a bit simpler and we can turn them around quite quickly. However, some of the major things related to £250 million of investment cannot be bid for through June monitoring. As I said, we have a plan in place to consult over

the coming months, and we will go to the Executive early in the autumn with an implementation plan, and, hopefully, get agreement for the way forward. That is the commitment that I have made to the industry, and I am committed to making sure that we meet that timeline. After that, we will see where the Executive can take the funding from or bring it to.

Rural Areas: Inequality

6. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how her Department is addressing inequality in rural areas. (AQO 4278/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is fully committed to fulfilling the section 75 statutory duties across all aspects of its business functions and through the effective implementation of its equality scheme. I continue to ensure that equality and good relations are central to decision-making processes and that we work to tackle inequalities and improve access to our services and information for the benefit of our rural customers and communities. My Department has also set out a range of actions and targets in its audit of inequalities to help to address persistent inequalities across our business remit. Along with others, my Department shares responsibilities to take forward a range of measures contained in NI-wide strategies, action plans and UN conventions.

Following agreement of the 2011-12 to 2014-15 Programme for Government Budget, I reaffirmed my Department's commitment to addressing rural disadvantage and inequality by allocating £16 million to initiatives that tackle poverty and social isolation. That is building on the success of work undertaken during the previous Budget period. Our work to strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas is primarily taken forward through the rural development programme. The current programme runs until 2013 and aims to create more sustainable businesses and jobs, support projects that will enhance the quality of life of local communities, and support strong community infrastructure. The next rural development programme, which will run from 2014 to 2020, is being developed. An equality impact assessment will be carried out and it will go to public consultation during the summer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Robin Swann for a supplementary question.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her answer. Most rural inequalities should surely be addressed under the rural White Paper action plan. Of the 94 actions contained in the rural White Paper action plan, how many has the Minister's Department achieved?

Mrs O'Neill: The White Paper is not relevant to the initial question, but I am happy to give the Member an answer, because we have regular cross-departmental meetings to make sure that it is not a shiny document that sits on a shelf but a living, working document. My predecessor Michelle Gildernew was committed to making sure that the project was started, and I am delighted that we were able to see it through. It is an ongoing piece of work. Cross-departmental meetings are held quarterly to discuss the actions. However, I am happy to write to the Member to outline where we are at in delivering on all the recommendations across all Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise to Mr Gerry Kelly, who should have been called first.

Mr G Kelly: Easily forgettable, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire. I notice that the Minister's voice is all but gone, so I am sorry that this is a short question. Does DARD have a strategic plan to improve the life of rural dwellers?

Mrs O'Neill: The simple answer is yes, we do. I recently consulted on the 2012-2020 strategic plan. In the consultation document, the Department outlined its commitment to promote equality of opportunity and good relations for rural dwellers. The Department has set out its intention to tackle poverty and social isolation. I am strongly committed to the work that I have taken forward around the £16 million to tackle poverty and social isolation. I want to make sure that we continue to roll that out because there are obvious natural inequalities for people who are isolated and marginalised. Those things need to be tackled. It is not the remit of just this Department to tackle those issues; it is every Department's responsibility. However, I am happy to take the lead and to ensure that all Departments play their role in tackling the poverty and isolation in rural communities.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Minister assure the House that there is no differential in Youth Service provision across the North and that people in rural areas are offered the same level of support and service as those in urban areas?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely support that. We have taken forward a number of initiatives that have

come through the tackling poverty and social isolation project, which is looking at actually funding groups that are in areas providing services and at youth employability. There have been a number of successful projects, and I want to make sure that that continues. There should be no disparity between the services that people get in rural areas and those in urban areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that question 7 was grouped.

Organic Farming

8. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the level of support available to assist organic farmers. (AQO 4280/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department provides financial support for farmers converting to organic production through the organic farming scheme. The scheme compensates farmers for the additional costs associated with converting land to organic production methods. Payments range from £470 to £670 per hectare over five years, depending on land type, and there are currently 31 farmers in the scheme. Support is also provided for organic farmers through the organic management option within the countryside management scheme. That provides an annual support payment of £30 per hectare for organically certified land, and there are currently 6 farmers availing themselves of that option. The organic farming scheme and the organic management option are funded under the rural development programme and are now closed to new applicants.

My Department encouraged development of the local organic sector through the organic action plan group, which was funded over a four-year period from 2005. The group, which was made up of organic stakeholders, produced an action plan containing practical proposals to help develop the sector. It concluded its work in 2009, having achieved the majority of its objectives. To complement that, my Department also provided a capital grant support scheme to help farmers to convert existing animal housing to meet organic standards. Some £2 million of grant aid was provided to 77 projects through that scheme, which concluded in 2007.

Furthermore, ongoing technical advice and training courses on growing organic produce are available through CAFRE's development advisers and technologists. There is a fully operational organic farm at Greenmount

College, which farmers can visit to learn more about best practice in organic production methods. DARD supply chain advisers can also provide supply chain and marketing advice. My Department also offers a wide range of support through various other schemes that are open to all farmers, including organic farmers.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. With adequate government assistance, the quantity of organic produce in the food chain would greatly increase, which would be a great benefit to both farmer and consumer. Will the Minister indicate what additional initiatives her Department plans to introduce to strengthen the organic sector?

Mrs O'Neill: The fact that we have had higher commodity prices in recent years has resulted in limited premiums at the farm gate, so I think that has been a disincentive to a lot of farmers from getting involved in organic farming practices. I think the stats are that, in 2006, 224 farmers were involved in organic practices, and, in 2012, that was down to 139. I think that much of that is down to the fact that they are not attracting a premium, so it is not necessarily something that is attractive to farmers who are trying to sustain their income. There is probably a weak market there, but I do think there is a niche market for organic produce among people who are interested in it. The CAFRE advisers, the development work that we are doing and the fact that we still run an organic farm at Greenmount that farmers can look at for themselves to see whether it is something that they are interested in is the type of work that we can do to produce it. However, it is very much market-led, and factors such as higher commodity prices will always have an impact on whether a farmer decides to get into organic farming.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I also wish her a speedy recovery. What has been the uptake in support for organic farming?

Mrs O'Neill: The organic farming scheme that the Department rolled out provides support to farmers who want to convert to organic production methods. It is funded through the rural development programme. There are 31 participants currently in the scheme, and they are farming about 1,100 hectares of land under organic management. That scheme is currently closed to new applicants. It actually opened in March last year and 33 applications came forward, but only six of those were progressed

through to agreement when they got through all the details. The scheme itself, within the countryside management scheme, is providing support of about £30 per hectare per year to a further six participants with 52 hectares of organically certified land under management. A small number of farmers are still involved in organic farming; however, as I said in my previous answer, that depends on the market and the associated costs of being an organic farmer.

Mr Elliott: Just for clarification, the Minister said that the market was a weak market but also a niche market. Over the past six years, has the number of farmers who are involved in organic farming increased or decreased?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said earlier — it was probably my voice and the Member could not hear me — the number of farmers who are involved in organic farming has decreased. It went from 224 farmers in 2006 to 139 in 2012. I said that fewer farmers are getting involved in organic farming because they are not attracting the premium that they need in order to be an organic farmer. That is because of rising commodity costs among other things.

It is a difficult market for people to get into, but although a small number of farmers are still involved and there is a small niche market for organic produce, the factors that I have outlined show that there is a declining number of people who want to get into organic farming.

Mrs D Kelly: I hope that the Minister's voice will return to full strength shortly.

The Minister said that organic farming was a niche market, and Mr Elliott asked her about that. Does she believe that farmers' markets are a way of helping to further promote organic farming? Is the Department as proactive as it should be in promoting farmers' markets, given the absence of them in many towns across the North?

Mrs O'Neill: Farmers' markets are fantastic. I have visited many of them, and I know that people are interested in the food journey and where their food has come from — the field-to-fork or gate-to-plate story. People like that idea, and I am happy to work with the industry to establish more of those markets because they are very successful. Organic food can often be found at those markets; it is unique produce, and the people who grow it can find a market for it there.

I will continue to work with the farming industry to develop all those things. The fact that the Department provides advice and runs an organic farm at Greenmount shows that we are interested in it and that we want to support anyone who wants to take that method of farming forward.

Ancient Trees

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the findings by the Woodland Trust on threats to ancient trees, to outline her plans to protect the 3,000 ancient trees that may be at risk from pests and diseases. (AQO 4281/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Woodland Trust's ancient tree hunt project, which has raised public awareness and appreciation of our oldest trees and has resulted in the identification and recording of over 3,000 ancient, veteran and notable trees throughout the North.

The primary responsibility for the protection of individual or groups of trees of special amenity, historical or rarity value lies with the Department of the Environment, which can make tree preservation orders under planning legislation. However, responsibility for prevention, containment and eradication of tree diseases is an important area of work for my Department. A plant health contingency plan is in place to deal with incidents of non-indigenous plant pests and diseases.

In the event of an outbreak, the plan contains procedures for carrying out an initial risk analysis and the establishment of an incident management team, which would develop a plan to put in place prevention, eradication and control measures, including surveys and stakeholder consultation.

This approach has been employed to manage the outbreak of Chalara, or ash dieback disease. Our experience has demonstrated the importance of agreeing a fortress Ireland approach to plant health matters, working with those most likely to be affected by the disease, such as woodland owners and farmers. We are considering views from stakeholders on our draft all-Ireland Chalara control strategy and we hope to publish that shortly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I am sure that the Minister is relieved, and I congratulate her on persevering. I am sure that we all wish her a full recovery.

Ms Boyle: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, and to the Minister for not being in my place to ask question 3. Go raibh maith agat.

3.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 21/11-15] be agreed. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Peter Weir, who is in his place.

Mr P Ramsey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Chamber is very warm today. Is the Deputy Speaker minded to relax the rules on the wearing of jackets?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am very reluctant to take on the responsibilities of the Speaker in his absence. At the same time, I am sure that, if Members are overcome, they can take a little walk.

Mr Weir: I am not quite sure whether I should start by apologising for being in my place to those who have to listen to my speech. There seems to be an indication of heat in the Chamber. I will try my best not to increase that. A particular level of sweat seems to have broken out on the SDLP Benches, so I will try to generate environmentally friendly air to waft across throughout the debate. I know that the Minister is very good at delivering a cold blast of reality, and I suspect that we may get that later in the debate.

I will try to keep my remarks fairly brief. As a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I welcome the Bill before us. Like the Minister and others in the Chamber, I have been through quite a few of these debates over the years.

First, it is important to look at the overall financial position. In terms of Budget Bills, we would all like the luxury of having a very large surplus that would allow us to choose between a range of good projects that we all wanted. I suspect that Members will come forward with a lot of good ideas during the debate. There will be a number of worthy suggestions for where the money could be spent. I do not think that anybody would disagree with that, but, in tough economic times, the choice is often between good projects.

We need to recognise the fiscal position that we are in, not only the impact of the recession on all our constituents but we should always bear in mind that the constraint upon us is the block grant provided to us by Westminster. Some in the House will want to go on flights of fancy involving Northern Ireland, in some way, going it alone financially or as part of an entity with the South. We have to face the reality that, when it comes to our fiscal deficit, we are very dependent on the block grant. Estimates vary, but the latest figure for our net fiscal balance is that the Budget is dependent on the subvention of somewhere in the region of £10.5 billion from the rest of the United Kingdom. That does provide a degree of constraint.

There has been speculation about efforts being made to lever in additional funds from the Exchequer across the water. All of us would welcome that, but, ultimately, it would not change the overall picture of our being in a tight financial position. As such, in looking at the way forward, we need to recognise the sensitivities and the impact of national decisions on us in Northern Ireland. We do not have carte blanche to act, particularly on welfare reform. All in the House will look at where we can benefit from devolution or where, in the words of Alban Maginness yesterday, we can look for "imaginative" solutions.

As the Minister said yesterday, every solution has a price tag. We will try to protect the most vulnerable, but we must realise that, with welfare, we cannot be self-sufficient. Consequently, it is vital that we approach the issue with some realism. Similarly, an issue in front of the Committee for Finance and Personnel is that of public sector pension reform. We will all have a great deal of sympathy for those directly involved. Again, we must realise that Northern Ireland simply going off into some type of "ourselves alone" situation is not financially sustainable. Although there has been some dispute over the figures, the Department has estimated that simply ducking out of that reform would cost a minimum of £260 million a year, and the cost would probably rise as the years moved by. That is something that should be a salutary lesson to all of us.

It is important, as was indicated at the Committee, that we take time to ensure that this is got right. However, some want to see the whole issue long-fingered for as long as possible. Indeed, some people have stated outside this Assembly an aim to put off pension reform for as long as possible. That is not in the broader interests of the community as a whole. We have to realise that, if there is an

additional cost to the public purse, that is something that has to come out of somebody's pocket. Essentially, as we do not have any major tax-raising powers, that will lead to cuts in other spheres of public expenditure. So, we have to be realistic about our position.

As indicated yesterday, it is important that, in looking at the pressures on all our constituents through the Budget, we try to minimise those pressures as much as possible. One of the levers that we have, which has been used very successfully, is rates. The Minister mentioned a comparison with the position a decade ago, and particularly the vast rate rises that occurred: on one occasion, under direct rule, there was a rise of 18%. A sensible approach has been taken by the Minister and the Executive on the issue of rates to ensure that at no stage during this term have regional rates risen by any more than the rate of inflation. On a number of occasions, those regional rates have been frozen.

Given that they are the wealth-creating and job-creating elements of our society, the measures that have been taken in the Budget to provide support for businesses are particularly useful. We are in a situation with business rates support where the majority of businesses receive that support. Particularly welcomed by some of the groups in the sector has been the level of support that the Executive have been able to give through the Budget to small businesses. The extension of the small business rate relief scheme is highly welcome: it has increased by around 25,000 the number of businesses that have received that help.

As indicated, our approach means that the level of rates that people pay in Northern Ireland is a great deal less than the equivalent across the water, whether it is England, Scotland or Wales. The figures will vary from area to area, but there is several hundred pounds of a difference. That is without the fact that we have taken the decision centrally not to impose water rates; the expenditure on water is met in the block grant. So, there is a considerable advantage to living in Northern Ireland, and there could be a considerable competitive advantage to the situation for businesses.

As a party, we are not giving up on this issue. The Budget needs to act as an accelerator to economic growth. At best, we are seeing a few green shoots of recovery, and I think that it would be widely felt around the Chamber that a more positive attitude from Treasury and the Government across the water as regards corporation tax would be helpful.

Finally, I will mention another issue that is crucial to our economy: capital spend. Sometimes, people accuse the Assembly of not doing a great deal, but the commitment over the decade to £18 billion of capital spend is crucial to the employment situation and to our economy. The indications this year are that we are in a better position to meet that target. Indeed, some of the Barnett consequential in the Budget indicate that we are in a stronger position.

We have seen a range of capital schemes, be they on our roads, through proposals from the Department of Education on new school builds, through the assets that have been unfrozen as a result of the A5 or through the commitment and hard work that is ongoing through the Department of Social Development (DSD). This week, we have seen the official announcement of £2.4 million of funding for public realm schemes, such as the one in Holywood and the one that will soon happen in Bangor.

There is a strong commitment on capital. At a time when the construction industry raises issues, it is vital that, in difficult times, public expenditure is helping to protect that sector of the economy as well as possible. The Budget is something to progress on. Therefore, in the overall picture, I commend the Finance Minister on the Budget and urge the House to support the Bill today.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leat as deis cainte a thabhairt domh sa díospóireacht seo. Ba mhaith liom díriú inniu ar an phróiseas airgeadais é féin, chomh maith le cúpla pointe a thógáil nár thug an tAire freagra orthu i ndíospóireacht an lae inné.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I certainly gained an insight into the process of accelerated passage yesterday when the Minister was almost out through the door before he moved the First Stage of the Bill. I know what accelerated passage means now.

I will concentrate on the reform of the financial process. The Minister mentioned that at the beginning of his speech, as did Members in yesterday's debate. I will refer first to a report published by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, 'Parliamentary Financial Scrutiny in Hard Times'. That compares the level of financial scrutiny across different countries and jurisdictions, and the report notes that the outdated Estimates Supply votes process that exists in a Westminster-style

system is a key barrier to effective parliamentary scrutiny of the Budget and financial reports.

The report states that, in countries that use the Westminster model of government, Parliaments cannot realistically amend the spending proposals, and many are barred from substituting a Budget of their own. Instead, they are confined to assenting to spending proposals that are put to them. The report states that the focus of financial scrutiny needs to be realigned with the Budget, spending plans and resource accounts, which requires significant structural and cultural reform. That criticism is true of our Supply-vote-style system, despite the in-year monitoring process.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel carried out an inquiry into the Assembly's ability to scrutinise the Budget effectively and came up with a number of measures to be considered to make that process more accessible and to provide opportunities and sufficient time for Members to contribute to and scrutinise the Budget and in-year processes. One of the measures was a memorandum of understanding between the Assembly and the Executive, which the Minister referred to yesterday. I very much welcome the progress in that area.

Another important recommendation was the establishment of a more regularised budgetary process, including a clearly defined pre-draft-Budget stage. That would facilitate earlier input from the Assembly, irrespective of whether it is an annual or multi-year Budget process. The third important recommendation was that Statutory Committees should use their powers more often to call persons and papers related to financial matters.

In 2011, the Executive launched their review of the financial process in response to the Committee's review document. It highlighted many of the recommendations that were raised in the Committee's inquiry. The Committee stressed that an early strategic Budget phase is one of the most influential stages of the Budget process and is, in fact, an essential requirement rather than merely an aspiration.

So, I welcome that a review of the financial processes has taken place, and I welcome the Committee's recommendations. I would like to hear from the Minister where exactly his Department is on those recommendations. It is important that no Minister block progress in this respect, and I think that it is also important that all barriers are removed and progress is made quickly.

3.15 pm

I shall raise a few points that arise out of yesterday's debate. Yesterday, I asked the Minister about the £18 million of European funding for the Titanic project. To be quite honest, I was surprised that the Minister said that, so far, not even one project had been identified for that funding. I want to ask him whether he is concerned that more progress on that issue has not been made.

I will return once more to the revenue-raising targets. The Minister told us yesterday that around £422 million has now been secured. I welcome that figure; it is certainly a resource that is very useful to the Executive here. I said yesterday that the original announcement was £1.6 billion, and I think that the Minister revised that back to £862 million. I remember that, at the time, the Minister said that he would include in the figure only those projects that could be realised. He has now brought in £422 million, so, is there a further £440 million to be realised in revenue-raising measures? If so, can that be done in the time of the budgetary period that remains?

I notice that the Financial Provisions Bill contains no reference to legislation to obtain the £40 million that was to be included in the Budget from the Harbour Commissioners. When I enquired about that, I found out that an arrangement had been made between the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the commissioners that the commissioners would provide buildings or building space for foreign direct investment. I would be interested to hear from the Minister the details of that arrangement and to know whether that means that the figure of £40 million is no longer available from the Harbour Commissioners.

Another point that I raised yesterday was about the £12 million that has been set aside for the childcare strategy. I said that, to my knowledge, around £300,000 of that has been disbursed to date. I made the point that many community and voluntary organisations involved in childcare are very much waiting on this funding. I cannot recall whether the Minister replied to that one, and I would appreciate his response today. Can he tell us when that particular resource, along with the childcare strategy, will be made available?

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch díot as an deis cainte a thabhairt domh, agus beidh mé ag súil le freagraí an Aire. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I will await the Minister's response.

Mrs Overend: It is vital that sufficient budgetary scrutiny take place, not least in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given its importance in supporting an economic recovery. To that end, I support the sentiments expressed by colleagues that the review of the finance process must be implemented as soon as possible. Further to that, with unemployment levels, youth unemployment and unemployment-related benefits all remaining stubbornly high, we must ensure that all resources are being used effectively. I must say that I remain particularly concerned at the latest PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) 'Northern Ireland Economic Outlook', which shows that we are slipping behind the rest of the United Kingdom in almost every economic indicator. We must, therefore, question whether this Budget is strong enough to reverse that trend.

I will use this opportunity to raise just a few issues concerning the 2013-14 Budget Bill that specifically relate to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. First, the situation with the legal dispute over the European grant to the Titanic signature project has already been raised during various stages of the budgetary process last year and in the past two days. I would welcome the Minister's clarification on how the £18 million request from the Enterprise Minister will be reallocated. Further to queries from my colleague Mr Cree, and just now from Mr Bradley, will the Minister detail when that allocation will be confirmed? We must maximise the benefit from European funding opportunities, and we have seen, through the proposed peace building and reconciliation centre at the Maze, for example, that that does not always happen. I hope that this significant funding will be put to good use.

A vibrant and fit-for-purpose infrastructure is a key driver in promoting growth, and constant improvements must be sought. That is truer than ever for our construction industry, which is suffering badly as a result of the economic downturn. I was pleased to read the latest Ulster Bank statistics, which show modest improvements in the sector. However, major government attention is still needed, as the industry is technically in decline, not least in my constituency of Mid Ulster, where I hear of continuing difficulties in the sector.

The Minister has been granted additional infrastructure spending of over £200 million from the Treasury through Barnett consequentials during this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. However, it is not quite clear how that money is being spent. Will he outline what specific projects that money

has been, or will be, made available for? I note his words from yesterday's Main Estimates debate, when he said:

"Some of it cannot be spent directly by Departments; it has to be given in the form of third-party loans. It is called 'financial transactions money', and we have to work our way through that to find projects". — [Official Report, Vol 86, No 1, p51, col 2].

I welcome more detail if the Minister can respond on that.

I am also keen to raise with the Finance Minister the issue of alternative financing, including partnerships between the public and private sector. That is something that the CBI in Northern Ireland has also been advocating. The Minister will be well aware that the current investment strategy contains no commitment —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Overend: Certainly.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that PFI funding should stand up in a business case? Is she surprised to learn that the new health and care centres for Lisburn and Newry were approved by ministerial direction and that no business case as yet has been presented?

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for his intervention and for a point well made.

The Minister will be well aware that the current investment strategy contains no commitment to use alternative financing until between 2015 and 2021. However the strategy does commit to:

"actively engage with institutional investors in order to attract inward investment into public-private infrastructure."

That leads me to ask two questions. First, what active engagement is ongoing with such investors? Secondly, will the Minister bring alternative financing methods forward into this year's Budget to boost the construction sector?

This is an important year for establishing the future of regional aid and selective financial assistance (SFA). I will not go into the issue in any detail today, as the House debated the topic recently. Suffice it to say, Northern Ireland's situation may well change in the not-too-distant future. I am particularly interested to hear of the alternative strategies being put in place, should the large sums spent on SFA no

longer be an option. Indeed, that was a recommendation of the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, which considered that area very recently.

I want to conclude by raising an issue of transparency that the Audit Office and the PAC also dealt with, alongside SFA, in the review of the Invest Northern Ireland report, relating to targets currently in place for job creation. At present, we set targets for, and measure, the promotion of jobs, which is the number of jobs promised by investors. We should really be dealing with the number of jobs actually delivered on the ground. Without that transparency, it is impossible to judge value for money in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Moving from job promotion to job creation would allow us to scrutinise future budgets much more robustly. I accept that steps have been put in place to address that. However, I am sure the Minister accepts that it is frustrating for MLAs to not have a clear indication of jobs created as we attempt to assess Northern Ireland's economic position.

Mr Lunn: I had better say at the start that I support the passage of the Bill — accelerated or otherwise — just in case anybody thinks that I may sound a bit negative as I proceed.

We live in a very challenging financial climate, and it is vital that every pound spent is spent efficiently. Therefore, it will not surprise anybody if I refer occasionally to the need for a shared future agenda that means something. It is a subject that has exercised the Alliance Party for many years and which, I am pleased to say, is now beginning to attract attention from other parties, most notably demonstrated by the recent issue of the document, 'Together: Building a United Community' by OFMDFM.

As I go on, I will probably appear to be sceptical about the document, but it is at least recognition that bringing our people closer together is a vital priority, not just for social reasons but for sound financial and economic reasons. The drain on our annual budget has been a source of discussion for many years, and it has been variously estimated at £1.5 billion by Deloitte, £1 billion by the Alliance Party and Oxford Economics, and a much smaller but unquantified amount by the Minister of Finance. Whatever it is — and we will never know for sure how much wastage there is — it is more important than ever that we cut down on waste caused by duplication of facilities and services.

In that respect, I want to highlight the failure of the Executive to bring forward the Education and Skills Authority Bill. That legislation is vital

as the first step towards streamlining our education system and enabling progress to be made in every aspect of that hard-pressed Department's activities from early years to GCSE, the schools estate, area planning, procurement and all the rest.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

The Bill has been in preparation for seven years. The first Bill failed and the current one is stuck with the Executive while the DUP and Sinn Féin eyeball each other and refuse to give an inch; mostly, I suspect, around the argument about grammar schools and their special status. The Minister spoke in the House this morning. The Chairman of the Education Committee is shaking his head, but I do not know: only the DUP and Sinn Féin appear to know anything about this. The Minister —

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that the Member should know. If I am not mistaken, the Member is also a member of the Education Committee, and he was party to a report that was produced and delivered to the House. If anybody thinks that, on the basis of reading the report from the Education Committee, there was consensus on the issues around ESA, I think that the Member needs to go back and read that report. Secondly, with regard to money, it is an absolute scandal and disgrace that almost £15 million if not more — nearly £20 million — has been wasted on a project that could have been introduced seven years ago had there been the will to introduce it. Real questions need to be asked by the Audit Office as to what the Department of Education has done in squandering nearly £20 million.

Mr Lunn: I am not sure which report the Chairman is talking about, Mr Deputy Speaker, but he seems to be agreeing with me that there are still considerable concerns about ESA and the potential loss or passage of the Bill.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I am referring the Member to the Education Committee's report on the Education Bill, in which it repeatedly said — I thought it was just for the sake of repeating it — no consensus, no consensus, no consensus. Maybe that is the report that the Member should refer to.

3.30 pm

Mr Lunn: I understood that it was a report that was presented to the Education Committee, not the one that we drew up ourselves. Obviously,

I am well aware of that, and well aware that there are contentious matters. However, the fact is that that report was delivered to the Executive two months ago. We wait for white smoke to rise, but nothing is happening. In the meantime — *[Interruption.]* I will move on because I really did not intend to get into that particular discussion today.

While the Executive fiddle, Rome is burning. The present education boards have been shorn of good staff. An unwieldy, inefficient system will continue to leak money, extend wasteful practices, spend money on schools that will probably close, and continue to allow the two main education sectors to coexist, with scant regard for what each other is doing. In my opinion, that is why we look forward to the establishment of ESA, if it ever comes. However, I fear that the good ship ESA is going to hit the rocks again, given the deafening silence from the Executive. In budgetary terms, that would be a disaster. The Minister reassured us this morning that ESA is coming. He did not know when — in this session or this mandate — but there is no sign of it.

I firmly believe that there is enough money in the education budget to provide the service for our children that we all aspire to, but major decisions need to be taken, and ESA is the starting point. The same comments apply to the much delayed review of public administration. Many figures have been bandied about around possible savings from the proposed changes. Frankly, I have no reason to believe any of them, but I am sure of one thing, which is that an 11-council model will ultimately be more efficient than a 26-council model and that budgetary savings will ultimately flow from that efficiency. Why the delay? Again, it is an Executive stand-off. I will not bother to dwell on that or to list the other long-outstanding matters such as welfare reform or the Planning Bill. Suffice it to say that we spend endless hours on private Members' motions, which may well be worthy in intent, but are non-binding and are generally dismissed by Ministers. While we agonise for hours over a few jobs for special advisers or same-sex marriage, the major legislation that we need to pass is pushed back, with inevitable consequences for Northern Ireland plc and the Budget.

I want to comment on some of the proposals in OFMDFM's 'Together: Building a United Community' document. I will start by complimenting the authors because they have used Alliance Party terminology in the title. It is a straight lift from our previous documentation. "United community", for those who may have

forgotten, is the designation of Members who have been sitting on these Benches since 2007. It is not easy to be critical of a vision that, in many ways, mirrors my party's aspirations, but this is a Budget debate. From that standpoint, it is concerning that so little detail is available on cost or whose budgets are to be affected. It is not reassuring that, for instance, a proposal to remove all peace walls in Belfast within 10 years should be brought forward without reference to the Minister of Justice, who has finally managed during his tenure to make some small inroads into that problem, or to detail in any way where the finance will come from to progress such an ambitious and sensitive project.

Whether feasible or not, I am not against visionary targets. They will cost money, but we do not appear to have that money or know where it is coming from. Likewise, the proposal to put 10,000 NEETs into employment for a year is being promoted as a means of bringing young people together in the workplace as a driver for social cohesion. Again, there is no reference to the Minister normally responsible for employment matters, and there is no indication of how much it will cost and from what budget it will come, or, for that matter, where the jobs will come from.

If you look at the proposal in the document for 10 new shared campuses, based on the premise that allowing schools to share facilities while remaining separated will somehow bring about a shared future, with greater understanding across the sectarian divide, you see not a single mention of integrated education. I well remember the First Minister's proclamations that he is a devotee of integration, and has been since he joined the DUP. His first speech to a DUP gathering was on integrated education.

The Department of Education has constantly failed to honour its obligation to encourage and facilitate integrated schools, which have proved for 40 years that it is possible to educate our children together in one school, with all the social benefits that flow from that. Instead, we are pursuing a separate but equal shared schooling agenda rather than the ultimately more beneficial — and, since this is a Budget debate, more cost-effective — solution of real amalgamation. Why build two schools when one would do?

The estimated cost of the Lisanelly shared campus is £130 million, and will probably be more in the fullness of time. However, that is the baseline figure that we have to go on for one major shared campus. OFMDFM proposes

10 such campuses. In the House a few weeks ago, junior Minister Bell indicated that the total estimated cost of the entire united community project over 10 years would be around £500 million. There is something wrong with the maths.

Mr Bell also indicated that the money set aside for the A5 project could be utilised, which clearly came as a surprise to Minister Kennedy. I notice that we are to debate shortly a UUP proposal to spend that money on other road projects to benefit the hard-pressed construction industry. So, which will it be? We are talking Budget here. It just does not seem to add up, so I will be interested to hear from the Minister about that. We badly need road projects.

It is obvious that our already strained budgets cannot cope with major extra demands. The 10 new campuses, if they ever go ahead, will probably devour Mr Bell's £500 million all on their own. We need to live within our means and our budgets. The First Minister has hinted at an economic pact with Her Majesty's Government, to be revealed on Friday, presumably as a reward for the progress around the shared future agenda. I am not, as you can probably tell by now, full of optimism about all this, but we shall see.

In the past few days, we have heard of the debacle at the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, with £18 million handed out to contractors for imaginary work. What were the Housing Executive and DSD thinking of? That is not small beer. I would like to know what percentage of the Housing Executive's maintenance budget that would represent.

How about the £2 million paid out to landowners in the west and not recoverable following the delay to the A5? There was the £900,000 spent by the Education Department on a failed assessment programme. If we go back a bit, there were the many instances highlighted by the Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee of incredible waste: the Belfast to Bangor railway line upgrade; the unworkable IT upgrades in various Departments; Balmoral High School; the land at Crossnacreevy that was grossly overvalued — and on and on it goes.

Having said that I will support the passage of the Budget Bill, I will finish by saying that I still support the passage of this Budget Bill.

Mr D Bradley: Really?

Mr Lunn: Yes, but we have a lot of work to do to stay within that Budget. I look forward to the Minister's comments.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I am pleased to be able to speak as Chair of the Committee for Regional Development. As we discovered yesterday, the provision for the Department for Regional Development for 2013-14 is some 6.5% less than the provision allocated in the Estimates in the last financial year. Much of that has come about as a result of the reprofiling moneys in respect of the A5 project. The capital allocation was £240.9 million and capital reductions of £336 million, again relating to the A5 and A8 projects.

Although I was unable to speak in the debate yesterday due to other business in the Assembly, I noted with interest in the Hansard report that the matter of the A5 was handled admirably by other Members. I welcome the suggestions they offered on how the money could be used.

Given that the project is in a state of delay rather than demise, the Minister, quite rightly, pointed out that there is some £113 million in the Budget for the project that needs to be spent in this financial year. The Minister, again quite rightly, pointed out that there is no flexibility to carry that beyond this financial year. The Committee has also been advised by the Department for Regional Development that it is returning £108 million of that in the June monitoring round but has bid for some £81 million to make improvements to our existing roads and for other related matters.

I know that my colleague the Finance Minister has been very generous to the Department for Regional Development in the past monitoring rounds when reallocating reduced requirements, and I hope that his generosity will continue for a lot longer. Currently, the backlog in structural maintenance stands at some £820 million, so this bid is very much deliverable, as has been witnessed in the past. The importance of infrastructure as a contributor to the wider economy cannot be underestimated. The reliance of the construction and quarry industries on those major investment streams has been recognised in the past by the House and by the Executive. I hope that that continues to be a central priority for government in Northern Ireland and that the Finance Minister continues with his welcomed generosity when he considers the out-turns arising from June monitoring.

Minister Kennedy came to the Committee for Regional Development at the end of May and advised that he had submitted a paper to the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues in which he outlined the benefit of accelerating other major road improvements. I am conscious that there is to be a debate on that matter soon, and I do not wish to spoil things. However, I can confirm that the indication was that the programme of works included the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway, the A31 Magherafelt bypass, the A26 Glarryford to Drones dual carriageway and the A55 Knock Road widening in Belfast.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: I thought that my mention of the A26 might provoke my colleague.

Mr Storey: When I hear the A26 mentioned, it always provokes an interest. Does the Chair of the Committee agree that although it is a very difficult task and challenge for any Department that has to make a decision on how and where funds are allocated, given the arterial route that the A26 is to the north coast and to the premier tourist attractions in Northern Ireland, it is vital that we continue to upgrade a road that has had a very poor road safety record. Clearly, it is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed. I think the Minister and the Executive need to take that matter very seriously.

Mr Spratt: I agree with what my colleague says about the A26. Certainly, it is the gateway and the road to the north coast and to all of that area. There have been many very serious and very tragic accidents and quite a number of fatalities on that stretch of road. Bearing in mind the cost of human life and the folks who, tragically, have been killed there over the past number of years, it is a road that very much deserves to be improved as soon as possible.

I can also confirm that the Committee for Regional Development would support that pragmatic programme. The progression of those works would further protect future budget allocations, should there be a prolonged delay to the A5.

It is vital that the moneys voted to Northern Ireland Departments are used in the most efficient and effective manner and that they meet, if not exceed, the Programme for Government objectives that were set at the beginning of this mandate. It is equally important that the elements identified in the savings delivery plans are achieved. The Department for Regional Development has a

savings delivery of £58 million over the coming year, and, at present, the Committee is concluding two inquiries, which, we believe, will deliver the potential for further savings in future years. I hope to bring one of those to the House for debate before the summer recess.

3.45 pm

The Committee has some concerns that the Programme for Government's targets and budgets for sustainable public transport might not be met. We continue to scrutinise the Department and the operator to ensure that that is not the case. I welcome the fact that, on top of the two inquiries into transport integration and delivery structures, the Northern Ireland Audit Office is preparing a value-for-money audit of Translink. I look forward to seeing the PEDU report on that organisation in the not-too-distant future.

On the subject of Translink, two weeks ago, the Minister and his senior officials came to the Committee. One question that they were asked was on the reserves that are held by Translink. Frankly, the Committee felt fully stonewalled by the answers and around how the Department was dealing with the issue. We were finally told that a figure of £8 million for this year was additional to the reserves of previous years, which then prompted a further look by finance researchers in the Assembly. The Committee examined Translink's accounts for 2012. It could see that it had total reserves of more than £19 million. However, the accounts also indicated that it had other reserves of £50 million. They did not indicate where or what those reserves refer to. Translink also held £10.55 million in cash at the end of 2012 and £13.5 million in short-term deposits. Translink was also able to clear a £31 million bank overdraft, which appeared at the end of 2011. Again, no explanation was offered about where those moneys came from.

Translink has just raised fares for the travelling public by up to 8%. It has asked the Department to bid for another £12 million for new buses. It has £19 million in reserves and £24 million in cash. It will be guaranteed a lucrative contract, which has not been widely advertised in other areas, for the next 10 years. It was soft findings, rather than an actual advertisement and procurement process. That is being proposed by the Department. The question must be whether, given the apparently lucrative reserves in Translink, DRD should be allowed to trundle along to the public purse at every opportunity to put business cases for additional cash for an organisation that, frankly, has failed fully to explain transparently the

reserves that it holds despite the fact that all members of my Committee have regularly asked questions of the Department and, indeed, Translink on the issue. We have been unable to get satisfactory answers. Before more public money is given, we need to be sure about those reserves.

The Committee for Regional Development has always been supportive of the Minister and his officials in the delivery of their services against and within their budget. We will continue to be strong in our scrutiny of the Department and its arm's-length bodies to ensure that our constituents receive the most effective and efficient services in the most economical way and that the Department delivers on its commitments to the benefit of the Northern Ireland economy. I support the Budget Bill.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I wish to comment at the outset as the Chair of the Committee for Education.

As the House knows, the Department of Education is one of the larger-spending Departments. In 2012-13, it spent over £2 billion, according to the Estimates document. The Committee has recently been advised by the Department that it spent around 99.5% of its 2012-13 budget.

I understand that the Education Department has one of the better records in budget forecasting for both capital and resource. From time to time, I am a little critical of the Department and its Minister. However, it would be remiss of me not to comment on the Department's good record in that aspect of financial management and to give praise where it is due. However, I am sure that that will probably decline and wane as I proceed through the comments that we want to make.

There are many demands and pressures on the education budget. A key concern for the Committee is the current substantial maintenance backlog in the schools estate. On behalf of the Committee, I would, therefore, like to record our thanks for the Executive's confirmation of an increase of some £10 million in the school maintenance budget as part of the allocations under the economy and jobs initiative, albeit that that is a small amount in the overall maintenance backlog given the deficit and the challenge. However, any amount of money that can be used to alleviate what are very serious and pressing issues for principals, teachers and staff in our schools is to be welcomed.

The Committee also welcomes the previously announced increases to the capital budget of some 4% in 2013-14 and the considerably larger increase to that budget expected in the following year. I will return to the issue of the capital budget.

A moment ago, I mentioned the Department's record on monitoring and living within its budget. The Committee recently spent some time looking into the savings delivery plans that cover the period in question and pertain directly to the Budget Bill debate. The Committee accepted the Audit Office recommendations on the 2008-2011 efficiency delivery plans. The Committee felt that the Department of Education's failure to comply with DFP's co-ordination of the savings delivery plan was simply not acceptable. The Committee noted the Department's good record in respect of capital and resource budgeting; nonetheless, it strongly felt that it should have participated in DFP's savings monitoring, if only to share its good practice with other Departments. It was regrettable to read in the Minister of Education's correspondence that it was quite clearly a "no" to being involved in the process of the savings delivery plans.

Sharing good practice with other Departments, unfortunately, has not happened. The Committee wants the Department to work inside the limits set by the Budget Bill, which we will vote through in the House today. The Committee, like the Finance and Personnel Minister, wants other Departments to do the same. I hope that, following the good work of the efficiency delivery plans, which is being done by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, common sense will break out in the Department of Education and its good practice in overall forecasting and budgeting will be shared across other Departments.

The Department's resource budget is large. It pays our teachers and keeps what is generally an excellent educational provision running and doing so in a way that is a credit to those involved in the delivery of our education service. The Education Committee wants to see education run more efficiently. It wants to see, for example, the Department's PEDU stage 2 action plans, which have yet to be produced even though the relevant PEDU reports were generated some 18 months ago. Members also want to see more action on the stage 1 PEDU report. The Committee simply wants to be sure that money is not wasted by the Department in the delivery of front line education services.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that there seems to be a lack of strategic thinking on the saving delivery plans? Take, for example, the saving of £15 million by the boards: that was measured very much at the input stage, but, if you look at the outputs, you see that, as a result of that saving, CASS has been decimated. How can you attack the area of literacy and numeracy if, in some board areas, you have only one numeracy co-ordinator right across the board?

Mr Storey: I agree. I know that, from the Member's experience in his past profession, he has a particular insight into the day-to-day challenges that face our schools and the way in which budget changes can dramatically change the outcome in the way that we deliver education in our schools.

There is an issue with the PEDU reports and the savings delivery plans in identifying the savings that can be made in a way that enhances rather than hinders front line delivery. We will come back to that point in a moment or two. We need to see how the Department of Education could have a better outcome in the Budget process through working with DFP not only for forecasting but for delivering services in our schools.

Efficiency in service delivery is an important issue for us. As we have said, front line services are vital. In education, the front line is the class-room, the teachers, the pupils and the schools. Earlier today, the Education Minister announced a revised proposal for common funding formula schemes. I assure members of the Committee who are present in the House this afternoon that the Committee will have a detailed examination of today's announcement. It may be that members will have to seek guidance from DFP on the matter. The Finance Minister may be asked to comment on elements of the proposals because there is an issue about how we ensure absolute transparency in the way in which funds are allocated to Departments.

Even today in the House, something in the region of £30 million has been announced as additional money through a number of proposals, and we have not yet seen a breakdown of where the money is coming from. I will hazard a guess: if the amount of money that is allocated to small schools support were removed, that would come very close to the amount of money that is being proposed for allocation to other schemes and other elements of the common funding formula. Members of the Education Committee will need to take that

very seriously as we look at the issue, because it has an impact on the overall framework that the Finance Minister has tried to set. As an Executive, we have to consider how we deal with the Budget in that, when a Budget is set, it is incumbent on Departments to work within the framework. When a crisis such as the A5 arises, we must, when possible, have sufficient robust methods and structures in place to allocate that money in a way that keeps Northern Ireland plc working to the maximum.

In the meantime and in the context of the Budget Bill debate, the Education Committee recognises the need for the simplification of funding arrangements for schools. However, the Committee wants the resource and capital covered by the Bill to be used to add value to the education of our children, both in measurable attainment and in the less tangible aspects of school life that we, as parents, know benefit our children, whether that be in a small rural school or an urban school with high levels of educational challenge.

The Education Committee has also spent quite some time reviewing the Department's capital programme, both the newbuilds and the school enhancement programme. The Committee welcomes the announcement about the former and looks forward to more news on the latter. The Committee understands that the budget for newbuilds is not a bottomless pit and that not every school that deserves a new building will have an announcement made on its future.

However, given the financial constraints, I think that it is more incumbent on the Department of Education than ever to provide more transparency on the newbuild process and more information on the progress of individual projects.

4.00 pm

We are all aware of the financial constraints on Departments. In previous debates, I asked for more information for Committees on the Budget and the spending process. I repeat that call today, and I also ask that Departments provide more information on their spending to all their stakeholders.

Those comments were made in my role as Chair of the Education Committee. I will, in conclusion, make a few comments as a Member. The efficient and effective use of resources in a time of economic challenge has been and continues to be a key issue for my party and me. As Chair of the Education Committee, I praised the Department for its

budget forecasting. I highlighted a number of key areas where the Committee feels that there could be improvements in the financial management of budgets. However, I want to raise a number of issues in which my party feels that there is room for improvement by the Minister and Department. A more effective and closer working relationship between the Minister, the Department and the Committee that they serve could yield more efficient and effective use of the resources in education.

I will highlight two key areas. One is developing new policy without taking account of an efficient use of resources. Over the past number of years, we have witnessed a number of new policy developments that have resulted in the expenditure of significant additional resource through new arrangements that officials argued were essential to ensuring improvement in the system. Despite widespread concern in the system about the usefulness of the particular change, officials forged ahead with the change on the basis that the concerns are being whipped up and that it will be all right on the night.

Six months later, the Committee receives reports that all is not well and that the concerns were not only real but ignored. One prime example was and is the computer-based assessment and the £4 million that was committed to an initiative that was seriously flawed from the outset. That has contributed little to improving the assessment process. Teachers and schools told Committee members from the outset that it was going to be problematic, and it was. Let us remember that the Minister told us that there was no problem or crisis. Just a few weeks ago, the Minister had to come back to the House to confirm that there was a problem and a crisis. I know that the members of the Education Committee are diligent and will have read their folder for the meeting tomorrow, so they will confirm what I am about to say: when you read the gateway report, you see that it raises serious concerns on how we still have many unanswered questions about that process.

The Member for Lagan Valley referred to ESA. When I first came to the House in 2003, ESA was being talked about by the officials and the Department as though it was going to happen imminently. This is the connection; it is not a tenuous link. It is not, as the Finance Minister tried to warn us, going from Dan to Beersheba to include whatever you possibly can in the debate. It is relevant to ensuring that policy is connected to the budgetary process in a way that does not lead to financial challenges or crises. We have money that should ultimately

have been spent more effectively and efficiently. Almost £20 million was spent on the ESA implementation team. I ask the House — the Finance Minister is present — whether anyone can really tell us what tangible benefit was given and delivered to our education service as a result of that process.

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr Storey for giving way. I take the point about the money that has been spent: it is hard to see the tangible benefit from that money. However, does he not accept that, in the longer term and for the greater good, ESA, in whatever form it appears, may turn out to be a better vehicle for the delivery of the education system than the disparate approach that we have across five boards and all the other organisations?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention. I accept that, if you were to take the eight organisations that were proposed primarily — the five education and library boards and the other organisations — and dismantle or amalgamate them, there are surely efficiencies that could be delivered. However, if you, as a policy statement or procedure, start to bolt on to that efficiency process a raft of other political or ideological agendas, or whatever, you move away from the real focus of why you wanted to do the thing in the first place. I think that that is where we have come to with the ESA process.

The performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) reports, and the report on school transport in particular, are prime examples. I commend the Minister of Finance and his officials for what I believe were outstanding reports in their breadth and their detail on home-to-school transport and school meals. They clearly indicated that, across the five boards, there was a huge difference in the way in which services were being procured and delivered. I come back to the point that, whenever you have a disconnect between a policy intent and the way in which a budget is delivered, it leads to issues such as the £20 million that I contend has been squandered on the ESA implementation group.

My second point is on the bureaucracy that is associated with spending, where poor processes and a lack of a decision process costs money. In part, that is similar to some of the comments that I have made. I believe that it is important to have proper procedures in place to protect the use of public money, but, at times, it appears that the Department has developed procedures that negate the efficient spend of that money. Capital spend is a good

example, and I know that the Minister has been attempting to make improvements in that area.

It is not acceptable that, once the Minister announces a capital project, the time taken to get that project shovel-ready — the phrase has become very common in the House — is often measured in years before parents and teachers see the bricks on the ground. In fact, it is not now even a case of seeing bricks. I attended the opening of the extension to a primary school that borders the North Antrim and East Londonderry constituencies last week, and there was not a brick to be seen. It was a modular building. I am sure that the Minister of Education is watching the debate with bated breath, but I commend the Department for its use of modular buildings, as they provide quick delivery of a high-standard, high-class educational provision for our children. I think that that is a good example of how the process can at times deliver a very good outcome for us all.

At a time when the effective use of public sector works can play a key role in rejuvenating the construction industry, our poor performance in that area needs a radical overhaul. One has only to look at the rate of progress on existing schemes such as that at Lisanelly in Omagh to make that very point.

I want to conclude by commenting further on the issues that my colleague the Chair of the Regional Development Committee made about the spends following the decisions on the A5. The A26 has been and continues to be a priority. We should use whatever influence we can bring to bear on the Minister for Regional Development and his Executive colleagues. They must give serious consideration to ensuring that the process that they will use to disseminate and distribute the moneys that will come as a result of the A5 project ensures that they are filtered and find their way into the continued and speedy delivery of what is a key route for transport, tourist infrastructure and the general well-being of the people of Northern Ireland: particularly the A26.

I know that Members have other valid and valuable projects in their constituencies, and they have every right to lobby and raise concerns and issues around those. However, I would be failing in my duty as a public representative for North Antrim were I not to place on record in the House, yet again, that I believe the A26 is a worthwhile cause. It is long overdue, and I trust that the Minister for Regional Development will take the same keen interest in the issue as we know that the Finance Minister has. We look forward to

seeing progress being made on that as this Budget Bill goes through its process.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate.

A Budget process offers an opportunity to determine the direction of an economy, even a small regional economy such as the North of Ireland's. The question is what economic pathway is being pursued in the remit of the Budget by the Minister of Finance and economic Ministers in the Executive. Minister Foster recently opened an extension to the Omagh business complex worth £2.3 million, £1.8 million of which was very welcome grant aid from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). However, the economic background is one of recession and austerity in the public and private sectors. We still have a banking squeeze on business and personal credit. The only finance available at the moment is what is quite often referred to as dirty finance — hire purchase (HP) or leasing finance — for plant and machinery. Thankfully, over the past 10 days, we have seen some new tractors, trailers and forage harvesters on the road; so somebody is availing of this sort of finance.

In terms of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), we have the single farm payment from Europe, which amounts to about £300 million per annum in total. That funding is crucial to the Northern Ireland economy. However, we also have infraction fines that are running at an accumulative value of about £100 million over the past five or six years. Even in the current financial year, millions are still being provided to meet EU infraction fines. The current CAP outcome is crucial for our farming sector, going forward. We hear some worrying signals, however, that the rural development budget will be reduced, particularly for the UK and the regions therein, including ours.

Here is a question, however: how well are we using rural development moneys in Northern Ireland to help develop small business enterprises? We need to finance more than just sporting and cultural projects. We still have a bovine TB problem in Northern Ireland. The eradication scheme that we have had is a largely failed project. Tens of millions have been spent on this eradication scheme over the past 40 years; yet, unfortunately, the incidence of bovine TB is higher than ever. Indeed, we have the highest incidence in the EU. In the current monitoring round, £12 million is being claimed to meet the cost in the 2013-14 year. We need to get to a better position, ideally to

the disease-free status attained in Scotland. Who is creating the urgency in Northern Ireland to really tackle this problem?

The Agri-Food Strategy Board produced an excellent agrifood strategy report. Inherent in it is a target requirement of £400 million public investment to implement the strategy over the next three to five years. However, an effective implementation plan is crucial. A sum of £250 million has been pinpointed as a requirement for a farm business improvement scheme. It is crucial that DARD produces an outline of how that can be financed over the next three to four years. The question is this: what initiatives will DARD bring forward to ensure progressive implementation of the strategy in order to achieve the growth and development targets outlined by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) chairman, Mr Tony O'Neill?

4.15 pm

The intensive farming sector for pigs and poultry has potential for growth, and we have the potential for managed growth. Moy Park has big development plans for the poultry industry, but there are two major problems: the issue of chicken waste disposal, and the need for banking finance to grow the sector. Moy Park recently intimated to me that it could double its operation in Northern Ireland, but that the biggest single limiting factor is the lack of business finance for farmers who want to become supplier agents to the company.

Turning to the A5 road money, it is alarming to see the number of MLAs who want to pick up that money and spread it all over the place. It was a major project that was outlined at the Hillsborough and St Andrews talks. Former Minister for Finance in the Republic, Mr Brian Cowen, kept it on the agenda and the former Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, made sure that there was total agreement on it. It is a major national strategic project, and I certainly want to see it delivered. I would not want to see it being handicapped in the future. The question now, however, is this: what should happen to the £113 million that was earmarked for expenditure in the current year? What can be done with that money to boost the construction sector and improve infrastructure to help the regional economy? As Mr Spratt outlined earlier as Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development, DRD has a backlog of structural maintenance, which offers an avenue for immediate use of the money.

Most MLAs have cited pet projects in their constituency. I want to mention one that I have mentioned here before, which is what I call the

umbilical cord road: the A32 between Enniskillen and Omagh. Given the review of public administration (RPA) and what we were told 10 years ago about a major acute hospital in Enniskillen, I hope that the A32 will not be forgotten. Why do I want to push that and other road projects? The answer is very simple: the construction industry is in the doldrums and I recognise that, as the Minister said yesterday, over 50% of construction activity is currently dependent on public sector projects. If we can give the construction industry a boost at this time by investing in public building projects through the reallocation of A5 moneys, I will support and welcome that. In west Tyrone, we are also waiting for the Omagh area hospital, which is crucial for health service provision but will also create construction employment locally.

Like the Minister, I am a humble economics graduate from Queen's in the mid-1970s. Recently, a book was written by a history teacher who teaches in Omagh Academy, Dr Russell Rees. That book states categorically that the last time Northern Ireland enjoyed a current account surplus in revenue was in 1931. The question we have to ask ourselves is this: what can we do to the regional economy to improve its performance? Is the subvention £8 billion, £10 billion, or, as Sinn Féin says, £4.5 billion per annum? The sooner we get into those figures and start tackling an economic plan that can realistically be developed, the better it will be for everyone.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak. I will keep my remarks fairly brief, which I am sure the Minister will be glad to hear. In my role as agriculture and rural development spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, I will focus on a number of specific matters.

As has already been outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2013-14 Main Estimates.

Unfortunately, yet again, the Assembly is being asked to pass a Budget Bill with very little information from the Department. In fact, in so many cases, all we have are the headline figures. Once again, the DARD budget, as well as those for most other Departments, will pass through this House with very little debate on its specific details.

The first point that I would like to raise with the Minister is my annual gripe, which is that DARD has yet again thrown huge sums of money at trying to tackle bovine TB and is about to do it again for another year. The simple fact of the

matter is that unless the Department really steps up to tackle the root cause of the problem, it is never going to go away. Millions have been spent, but with very little impact on eradicating the disease. The fact remains that incidences of bovine TB are commonplace, and, in some areas, they are actually higher than they were in 1996.

I see from the Estimates that the veterinary service will receive a net total of just over £40 million this year, and I wonder how much of those costs are going to pay for what are avoidable diseases. I suppose that one welcome development since I spoke in this debate last year has been the announcement of the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) programme. I will wait to see what impact that will have, if any, on the financial black hole that is DARD's bovine TB strategy, if, indeed, it can be called a strategy.

I note from the Estimates that there is also continued investment in the Northern Ireland Forest Service. Once again, I will make the call that my party believes that further use of the agency's assets is possible — and I do not mean solely from a recreational perspective. I believe that, with a little extra support, staff and encouragement, the agency could become even more economical.

Another crucial issue that is missing from the DARD and DETI Estimates — I am sure that the Finance Minister will correct me if I have missed something — is the absence of resources to help deliver even parts of the Going for Growth strategy. That action plan was released to great fanfare at the Balmoral show, but without resources being directed to it, it cannot ever achieve its targets. To quote from the document:

"Ensuring the successful implementation of the Strategic Action Plan will require support from Government of around £400 million."

Although I would expect the Executive to be in a position to provide — sorry, I would not expect the Executive to be in a position to provide that level of resources up front. I think I was being slightly hopeful there. I believe that the wider agrifood industry deserves to know what level of support it is likely to get, if anything at all, so that it can begin to organise and plan for the future.

I would appreciate it if the Minister could give us a general update on that request for funds, either later this afternoon when he responds to the debate or perhaps in a couple of weeks'

time when he announces the June monitoring round.

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, will seek to keep my remarks as brief as possible, as I fear that it may soon be just the Minister and I in the Chamber, and I want to avoid that at all costs. As a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I support the Budget (No.2) Bill. Most of the comments that have been made today have been constructive and reasonably well tempered. Of course there are exceptions to that rule in all debates, and I was particularly concerned about some of the comments that were made by the Ulster Unionist Member for Mid Ulster. I agree with Mr Storey: we are in the real world and we know that, financially, times are difficult and that the block grant is consistently under pressure. We then, as an Assembly, have to be careful as to how that money is allocated locally. I am not insulted by the comments made, nor, I am sure, is the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, I expect that the people who will be insulted by them are those in business who have put their hand in their pocket, even over the past six weeks, when they delivered over 1,000 jobs to Northern Ireland. Today, Almac announced 229 jobs. That is to be welcomed, and we should congratulate the company on the delivery of those jobs.

Let us look at the companies that announced a combined total of well in excess of 1,000 jobs in the past six weeks: Mango Marketing; Latens Systems; Greiner Packaging; Vello Systems; Galgorm Castle; Ballyrashane Creamery; Linden Foods; Deloitte; Pharmedlink; Merchant Warehouse; Wrightbus; and Glen Dimplex.

We know that times are tough, but when we step up in the Assembly, we have to take on board the work that goes on behind the scenes. We must also take on board the work done and risk taken by the private sector to bring these jobs in. We have to be very careful to temper the language that we use because everyone in the Building is committed to the economy in Northern Ireland going from strength to strength. It is, I am sure, the topic at the front of all our minds, at constituency level and in the business that we do here. So I do not think that the remarks made about jobs being delivered on the ground were helpful. The whole tone was pessimistic and not helpful to the work that all of us are trying to do to rebalance and grow the Northern Ireland economy.

I want to relate most of my remarks to my membership of the Policing Board, so I will focus, just for a couple of minutes, on the Department of Justice budget, the details of

which we have before us. It cannot go unnoticed that the provision being sought is nearly 8% lower than this time last year. We have to ask the question: where will that affect, and where will the money be taken from? I know that the Minister of Justice will not get a chance to respond to this debate. However, I think that the concerns have to be made public, and then, hopefully, an opportunity will be given for the Minister to respond in due course at an appropriate time.

It is inevitable that some of the 8% cut will fall on policing, which must concern us. An operational policing model is being consulted on, and I have real concerns that we will find some of our police officers, particularly those of senior rank at district level, in a position of having to choose, purely based on budgets, between response policing and neighbourhood policing. That would be a very unfortunate place to get to, and, therefore, I hope that the Minister of Justice, working within his means, will ensure that the PSNI is sufficiently resourced to meet its commitments at local level.

Taking that a step further, I would find it astonishing, if policing budgets were under pressure, for the Assembly to turn down something that was offered for free and would help policing. Whether we like it or not, in September of this year, the legislation under which the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) operates will cease to exist. We know for sure that, in England, Scotland and Wales, the National Crime Agency legislation will replace that. In Northern Ireland, it appears that, because of disagreement from a certain side of the House, that may not be the case. This is a time of stretched resources. Policing has made considerable gains in neighbourhood policing and community policing, which has been instrumental in building relationships between communities and the police that, let us face it, many of us would not have thought possible. It would be a travesty if we got to a place where, as a result of cutting budgets, a lot of that work was undone. Therefore, when SOCA ceases to exist, we are going to have to replace it and plug the gap some way. If we are not going to replace it with the National Crime Agency, I throw the challenge out to Members on the Benches opposite to explain how we are going to plug that gap. Do we take it out of neighbourhood policing? I certainly hope not. Do we take it out of response policing? That is impossible; we need response policing to deal with the day-to-day crimes that take place in our Province. So, people need to think very carefully about the road that they go down

regarding community policing and about their position on the National Crime Agency.

4.30 pm

The next issue we have to be careful about on the justice side of things is the fantastic event that is happening in Fermanagh next week, which I hope we are all embracing as a good news story. It is going to cost money to make sure that it is secure, and a fair amount of the pressure from a budgetary point of view is going to fall upon the police. We have to make sure, and this is where I would encourage the Minister to use his Westminster role, that continued pressure is put upon Minister Alexander, who made some commitments last week that remuneration for the security costs would be made expediently, quickly and efficiently. I hope that that will be the case, and perhaps the Minister, in his role at Westminster, can continue to ensure that it is.

I am going to say no more than that. The debate has gone on for a considerable time, and there are still some Members who are down to speak. In concluding, I mention again the issue of equal pay: a resolution needs to be found between the DOJ and the PSNI in that regard. There needs to be a greater degree of —

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes; I will.

Mr Lunn: Would the Member not include DFP in that possible solution, given that it is the Department with responsibility for the issue?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. It would not have come as any great surprise to him that I did not mention DFP at this stage, bearing in mind that the Minister has made his position on the matter pretty clear. There is a complex issue, and I do not think any Member, ministerial or non-ministerial, will be found wanting when it comes to wanting to find a resolution to it. Pensions and pay issues are complex; we know that. Therefore, we need to try to get to the bottom of what has gone wrong here and see how we can put it right, because there is a moral duty on us to try to find a resolution.

There is the issue of pensions around injury on duty as well, and members of the Policing Board in particular and Mr Lunn will know very well that there is a continued concern around how those who served this country valiantly, fearlessly and with tremendous dignity find

themselves being treated regarding their pension provision around injury on duty. That it is something that we will need to continue to try to find a resolution to. I mention these things because they are all budgetary consequential. I have to say publicly that I hope that the Minister of Justice, within the provision that he has sought, has ensured that all those demands can be met.

I support the Budget Bill's passage.

Mr Beggs: First, I agree with the earlier comments of my colleague Leslie Cree that we have a financial process that is not fit for purpose for the Budget. We really must bring about improvement to give greater understanding, accountability and transparency around that financial process. I will highlight some of my dissatisfaction with the current process. There are a lot of detailed figures behind the Budget, and the numbers that make up the figures in the Budget are in the Northern Ireland Estimates 2013-14. I understand from the Business Office that it was placed there last Thursday or Friday. I was unaware that it was there. I am normally at the Assembly on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and so I picked up my copy yesterday. I am on the Health Committee, and it does not meet again until Wednesday. So we have not had a chance to discuss any of the issues in it. I wonder whether the rest of the Committees have had a chance to discuss the issues in it. Yes, there is an issue of prioritising between Departments and also an issue of prioritising how that funding is being spent within Departments. I would have thought that any functioning Assembly should take constructive criticism and difficult decisions to Committees, and priorities from those Committees should be shared and, hopefully, adopted.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair)

As I mentioned earlier, business cases for decisions are very important to ensure that that money is spent well. When I was on the Finance Committee previously, the announcement was made that DARD was to move to the new site in Limavady. It might be perfectly logical; I do not know. At that time, I asked where the business case was, because if the proposal stacks up, the business case should show that it stacks up. I am unaware of its ever having been published. Similarly, as I indicated earlier in an intervention about the new health and care centres, I understand that the new centres for Lisburn and Newry have been approved by ministerial direction without business cases being presented and agreed. I am picking up comments that perhaps

everything might not be as sweet as it might appear. Have all the GPs agreed to move into that new structure? What is the point of building that new building unless it will all work together effectively rather than creating a white elephant with ongoing costs to the public sector?

I will concentrate my comments on health because that is the Committee on which I serve and I have more information on that area. Everybody recognises that there are huge pressures on our health service, and that affects many people in the local community. We hear stories that people have gone with their loved one to Antrim hospital to find three ambulance crews inside the hospital who cannot go back out because their patients have not been handed over or that the corridor is full with other trolleys because of backing-up due to an unavailability of beds elsewhere. There are huge pressures on our nurses and doctors who work in that accident and emergency department and on those who work throughout our hospitals. I recently learned that the bed occupancy rate in Antrim Area Hospital is 95%. Some may think that that is very efficient, but the difficulty with that is that the optimum figure has been calculated as 85%, because you always want to have a bed available so that someone else who comes through the A&E system can be located at short notice so that necessary cleaning and sterilisation can occur; and so that there is not an overburden on the staff. Let there be no doubt that there are huge pressures on our accident and emergency departments at present.

The four-hour waiting time is the critical judgement throughout the United Kingdom: that is, has an A&E achieved its target of treating 95% of patients within a four-hour period. Last autumn, the Health Committee heard from officials who chose to pick on the 12-hour waiting time figures. They told us that things are starting to turn round and look better. I took the trouble to look at some of the historical figures, and there was a clear pattern in that things tended to improve as you come to the summer period but that, in the winter period, winter pressures exist and waiting times worsen. We were being told that things were starting to get better, but that has not been the outcome. In major A&E units throughout Northern Ireland, there is a downward trend. The best performance in any one month had been going down for each of the past few years, and the worst performance in any month has been going down for each of the past few years. I was concerned about the somewhat relaxed approach from officials who appeared before the Committee. They told us that things

were starting to get better, when clearly the trend did not show that. The published figures for March and April show the worst figures for A&E performance against the four-hour target in the past five years, such are the pressures in our hospitals and A&Es. Does the Budget assist and provide the necessary funds for improvement along with all the other planned changes? The Minister made a statement about those earlier today.

When I read the original 2011-15 Budget, I discovered that, several years ago, some £4.569 billion had been allocated for 2013-14. However, I notice that, in the latest Estimates, some £4.671 billion — an additional £102 million — had been allocated. I welcome those additional funds, but are they sufficient? Unfortunately, too many people have to wait more than 13 weeks, and some people have to wait more than 36 weeks to see a consultant. As I said, we have issues with our accident and emergency units. We need a range of improvements, such as increasing primary care provision to ensure not only better services but a better range of services, including GP-led services, whether in surgeries or through aftercare such as the Dalriada doctor-on-call service in my area. It is important that patients do not feel that they have no option but to appear at A&E and that more people can be effectively treated by other means in the community.

What are the additional budget pressures and priorities in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? When the presentation was made to the Health Committee, there was a letter from the Minister dated 24 May on his priorities for in-year monitoring in which significant pressures were indicated. Why, three months into a budget, is the Minister indicating significant pressures? Has sufficient money been allocated? When you drill down on what the Minister is saying, it becomes quite interesting. He and his Department have priorities that are not being met in the Department. In particular, under Transforming Your Care, there is a bid for £28 million. This is the flagship policy that we are all relying on to try to take pressure off our hospitals and accident and emergency units, and we are bidding for it in in-year monitoring. That concerns me. Will the £28 million be available to meet the essential needs that have been identified? If not, what will happen?

4.45 pm

There is a further bid of £26 million for the health service in the current year. Again, very early on in the year, the Minister is highlighting

the difficulties that exist. In fact, he is saying that this money is needed or an additional 75,000 assessments or 22,000 treatments will not be completed this year. He estimates that that is what is needed above the core funding capacity in the budget. So, if we do not get that bid in the in-year monitoring, there will be a great deal more pressure on the budget. These services are critical to people who need assessment and treatment. Where assessment is concerned, we are talking about orthopaedic services, general surgery, gynaecology, ENT and oral surgery. An actual gap in treatment could arise in orthopaedics, cardiology, general surgery, chronic pain management and plastic surgery.

Again, I ask the questions: can we afford to allow all our waiting lists to extend by that amount? Are we funding the National Health Service in the best way? A bad use of money can happen when, at the end of every year, there is a sudden flood of money and some is thrown at problems. When that happens year on year, the question must be asked whether we would be better looking at the core budget and putting in regular, recurrent funding so that better treatment can occur in the health system. If we know that there is the pressure and we know that we can manage it better by taking that peak out of it and dealing with it in the public sector through the health service, surely that would be better. I recognise that the private sector has a role to play on occasions, but when, repeatedly, year in, year out, the same issue arises, the question should at least be asked: is this the most efficient way to run the health service, or should we be changing the baseline budget to better manage that service?

I see also in the Minister's current funding bid that £1.2 million has been set aside for health and social care and the Fire and Rescue Service during the G8 summit. I thought that the Foreign Office would pay for any additional pressures on services in Northern Ireland related to the G8. So, I pose the question: why is the Department of Health having to bid for money in the in-year monitoring? Will that money be recouped if additional pressures are applied and an argument can be stacked up justifying it? Why is the Foreign Office not providing for those additional resources and for the need that might exist?

One of the key policies in the change process that is under way in the health service is the introduction of integrated care partnerships. However, I have seen little information about whether there are sufficient funds or whether sufficient preparation has been made in

governance arrangements so that those organisations can get moving and help to provide additional services in the primary care sector. The bid is also for service changes, voluntary redundancy, voluntary early retirements and general implementation of Transforming Your Care. So, there are some very substantial amounts of money in the in-year monitoring bid that, I would have thought, the Minister of Health would deem essential for addressing the huge pressures that exist there. Of course, at one point not so long ago, we were told that the health service does not need any more money. I will leave that thought hanging so that those who said that can reflect on it.

It is clear that we need to do things better. We need to look at how we administer the money and how we can better provide services. We have to change, and there has to be funding to enable that change. I hope that the funding will be there to enable that change.

The other aspect of the June monitoring bid is that, on top of the current funding bids, there are significant capital bids for the health service. Again, there is £13.5 million for the implementation of Transforming Your Care and another £3.5 million for health and care centres to enable them to take on some more of the primary care work.

There is some money for enabling work at the children's hospital, including an energy centre, and £10 million to maintain existing services. To maintain existing services under the capital requirements, there is a bid in for £10 million. Therefore, the health service needs £10 million to maintain existing services. There is an interesting set of words here:

"in areas of highest risk for staff and patients' service provision".

I am not sure exactly what that means, but it gives me some concern that in-year monitoring is having to pay for maintaining existing services. I am assuming that that is for essential maintenance requirements. There is also £10 million for an ICT bid and a significant amount of money — £8 million — for equipment scanners. We are told that those are cardiac cath labs for the Royal at £3.5 million, a percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) lab at £0.5 million on the Altnagelvin site, and others besides that. I understand that much of that funding is essential to Transforming Your Care — that flagship proposal. I go back to what I said earlier: why has that essential change not been built into our Budget so that we do not have to rely on in-year monitoring? It puts the

health of our community and those who need assistance at very high risk.

There will also be changes in how our older population is looked after under Transforming Your Care. The current health policy is not to refer any new residents to the statutory residential care homes but to refer them primarily to domiciliary care. There are areas where sufficient alternatives are not available. For some, domiciliary care can be a very solitary experience, particularly if you have limited family and friends. Whether you are in hospital, residential care or supported housing, having access to family and friends is important for your well-being. It is also important to enable you to recover and improve from any ailment that you have had.

There has to be a review of the capital assets in each locality. Is that contained in the Budget? Where are the proposals to close residential care homes? Are there any alternatives? In Larne in my constituency, I have been made aware, first, that the alternative residential care in the private sector does not have the en suite bathrooms that apparently are the main driver for this, not that that is what the residents said was essential — the quality of care is what they consider essential. Secondly, many of the residential spaces in the private sector are shared rooms, so it is not a private en suite room but a shared room.

The third factor is perhaps the most interesting. I am told that the private sector rooms are full. Therefore, if you shut down some of our residential care homes, there is currently no alternative. It was not that long ago that I learned of a constituent who tried to get their mother into Joymount House and ended up being referred to a home some 40 miles away before getting a location nearer to hand. It is important that there are alternatives locally, including residential care homes. It is also important that there is a range of service provision. It should not be just domiciliary care or residential care. Surely there is a range in between, and I think of sheltered housing. Is there suitable sheltered housing, and is there suitable supported housing where assistance will be at hand for those who need it? Thankfully, there is a firm plan to build a 36-bed unit at Greenisland House in my constituency. It will have 12 beds for people who require minor support, 12 beds for people who require medium support, and 12 beds for people who require higher dependency care. Following the announcement of the closure, there was little development in progressing the alternatives. There were discussions in the background, but there was no real development to move on and

transfer ownership to a housing association to apply for the planning permission. Thankfully, within the past six months, that has occurred.

Also, until a year ago, that scheme was not even on the Housing Executive's capital build programme. Has the Department for Social Development's supported housing programme been scrutinised so that there is sufficient capital build to provide essential supported housing so that a range of options can be provided in each community? I have no doubt that there will be a range of needs. Some people may well return to their homes, with the support of family and friends, and integrate back into the community. That is good for them, and it may be what they want. Some may go into residential care, and others may use other areas of support, such as sheltered or supported housing.

This is also important for the health service with respect to efficiency. Someone has to call with those people and give them additional support in their own homes, but it would be much more efficient to have a number of people together in supported or sheltered housing units than to have care workers travelling considerable distances between visits. Efficiencies can be brought in, and more time can be spent meeting the needs of residents and engaging with them.

I would also like to talk briefly about primary school funding in the Budget. For many years, there have been announcements of new primary school funding, but you tend to find that an announcement is followed by a large gap, expectation is built up, and little is delivered. Essentially, you have joined a list.

I would like to highlight a number of primary schools in the east Antrim area where there are needs to be addressed. The majority of the classroom accommodation in Woodburn Primary School is made up of portable classrooms, along with an older school. High quality education is being provided there, it is well regarded by the community and the parents, and it is delivering a vital service, but, as yet, that need has not been recognised. A number of years ago, funding was made available to buy adjacent land and make that early provision, but, ultimately, we need a complete new school. Has that need been addressed in the Budget or by some alternative funding arrangement?

I am open to alternative funding arrangements, because we need to meet the needs of our children, provided that the business case stacks up. It must stack up, and it must show that there are benefits by doing it that way. We do

not want to simply borrow and borrow and build a millstone for the future. If the benefits stack up, we should be open to it.

In terms of the Islandmagee new school build, there has been talk of a new school on Islandmagee going back too many years. Originally, three schools on the island agreed to amalgamate, and it was a very difficult process to get agreement between each of the three groups of parents and governors, but it was agreed. There was then difficulty in getting a suitable location. Eventually, after a long, arduous process, planning permission was agreed and land was purchased. Unfortunately, it has been sitting for a number of years, and large numbers of young people have been passing by what will be the front gates of that school, because, as yet, it has not been built.

5.00 pm

There is currently a consultation about possibly building a school for Islandmagee and the surrounding area. I can interpret the surrounding area only to mean Ballycarry. However, when you look at the village and ward of Ballycarry, some interesting facts emerge. In particular, as far as I can recall, the most recent Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics indicate that 47 newborns arrived in that ward a short number of years ago. They will be coming through and clearly producing a sustainable number of children for any school. Therefore, I concur with the views of the local community of Islandmagee and Ballycarry that there is a sustainable future for a school at Islandmagee and a continuing school at Ballycarry. I hope that funding will be made available for that, and not some time over the horizon but within this Budget period.

It was announced that Corran Integrated Primary School was on the newbuild programme but does not yet have planning permission. I hope that that will progress shortly so that the children who are being educated in mobile classrooms will have a permanent building, be educated in a modern setting and be able to take their opportunities in optimum conditions. I also hope that the poor traffic flow in that area can be addressed. That, to a degree, is a health and safety issue, and it also affects residents.

I am sure that many other issues in this Budget period will require improvements. However, I go back to the issue of insufficient discussions in Committees and in the Assembly on the detail of the Budget. I sometimes wonder what

is the benefit of this discussion. I suggest that we need a different process to ensure better understanding and so that improvements can be made where needed.

Mr B McCrea: I wondered why the Member for Mid Ulster did not hang around to rebut the attack by David McIlveen but I now realise that it was because she knew that Mr Beggs was going to speak for some considerable time.

At least Jim Allister turned up, and I welcome him to the Chamber. He is temporarily not here but — oh — how nice of him to make an appearance. It is amazing how these things work. Perhaps somebody will tweet it. Obviously, I cannot do that because I am speaking.

I really do wonder why the UUP and even the Alliance Party are going to vote for this Bill because they have done nothing but go through list after list of things that are wrong, missing or should be done better. What does it take to get you to vote against something?

A brief review of Hansard, and listening to the debate for some time — I have been in the Chamber for a fair amount of it — will demonstrate to you that this process is a mess. What I hear and read is that people say, "We don't know this and we don't know that, but, you know what, we have no other option but to vote it through anyway." Get the information and make a decision, or something else has to change.

I was taken by the brevity of the contributions yesterday, and I will try to act likewise today.

I went to the Business Office to see what discussions it was appropriate to have in this forum and was told that we could talk on some general economic points.

I guess that all of us here are familiar with but take no comfort in the financial trials of the Republic of Ireland, where economic activity has declined by some 11.5% from its peak. What perhaps is missed in this Chamber is that our performance in Northern Ireland is, arguably, even worse. We have suffered a decline from the peak of 11.9%, and that is significantly worse than the rest of the United Kingdom, at 6.2%. It is not just our businesses that have been affected. Ordinary citizens have been crushed by falling property prices, the increased cost of basic supplies, increased unemployment and all sorts of fears about welfare reform. That is an issue that, perhaps, this Budget ought to address. Property prices are now half of what they were at the peak of

the market, and employment has fallen by 40,000, with a corresponding increase in claimants to 64,300. That represents an increase of 172%, which is much worse than the rest of the United Kingdom at 85%. You could be forgiven for thinking that things could hardly get worse, but I fear that they will. As a result of the poor performance of the UK economy, Westminster is seeking further savings from the welfare system, largely through below-inflation increases in benefits. Living standards in Northern Ireland, which are already substantially below those of the rest of the United Kingdom, will continue to fall in real terms and relative to the UK. In the previous decade, we were about 80%, measured by GDP, and we are now forecasting it to fall to 75%.

Yesterday, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, with his usual combination of wit and charm, attempted to tell us that things were not so bad. I think that he even mentioned that some of the banks' economists are suggesting that we have turned the corner. I had a look in Hansard at some of the things he said. He talked about the increase in employee jobs during 2012 and about claimants, and he actually said:

"The latest Bank of England forecasts paint a relatively optimistic and positive scenario for the UK". — [Official Report, Vol 86, No 1, p11, col 1].

I am rather surprised by that, because I have here the annual report from the economic advisory group, which advises the Executive. The Office for Budgetary Responsibility estimates that the UK economy will grow by 0.6% in 2013, the year in which this Bill applies, and 1.8% in 2014. That is down from earlier forecasts of 1.2%. So it is halved this year, and it is lower in the following year. I am, therefore, surprised that there is that optimism from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the Bill ought to address those issues.

It is true that the claimant figure has fallen over the past three months, but I wonder — perhaps the Minister will shed some light on this; he referred to it in earlier statements — if that represents a real improvement in the economy or a statistical response to the £200 million economy and jobs initiative announced earlier in the year. That funding focused on providing training, skills and education to those out of work. That is absolutely the right thing to do, but will people on such schemes reduce the claimant count only for the duration of the scheme? When the money runs out, will they return to the claimant count? Are there real

jobs for them to go to? Whilst long-term economic development is of strategic importance, it seems to me that the most pressing need for the Executive is to create jobs. I have said repeatedly and will say again that we are not doing enough to tackle unemployment, particularly youth unemployment. The chair of the economic advisory group has stated in the report, in very politically correct language, that the flags protest presented "a clear reminder" to politicians of the need:

"to deliver an improved economic environment which can allow all members of society to become invested in the future of the region."

That is spelling it out that we need to do more to create jobs or we face civil unrest and further problems.

In its annual report, the EAG stated that it is unclear as to how the Executive have reprioritised their spending decisions in light of the more constrained economic climate and the increased emphasis on the economy. That is the Government's economic advisory group telling the Executive that it does not see where they have addressed the issues that face the economy. If it does not see that and we do not have the information, it behoves the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain what he is doing in the Budget to address the issues that his and the Executive's advisers bring up. Furthermore, the EAG calls on the Executive to seek further ways to divert additional resources towards priority areas that support the delivery of their economic vision. We have not seen any such action. I would like the Minister to identify where it is.

I concur with the sentiments of the EAG in its very rational analysis. However, if I were to table an amendment to the Bill to address those issues, I would be asked, "Where is the money coming from? Which Department will you take the money from to increase spending on youth unemployment or unemployment itself?". A reading of yesterday's Hansard and listening to the debate on this Bill will demonstrate that every Department is under severe pressure. In fact, I heard Mr Beggs go through a litany of issues that have not been addressed in the Bill or in the figures. We have a real issue. Given the priority that the Executive have given to the economy, which is well stated, the announcement of the Building a United Community initiative and the encouragement — to use its word — of the economic advisory group, I have come to the conclusion that the Executive must be relying on substantial

additional money to be provided from as yet undetermined external sources.

Yesterday, the Minister stated:

"Over the coming months, there will be a number of critical public expenditure issues to be addressed with Treasury Ministers that will have a strategic impact on Northern Ireland." — [Official Report, Vol 86, No 1, p11, col 1].

What are those strategic initiatives? What are those decisions? Is there an implicit understanding that substantial additional funds — perhaps as much as Mr Bell's £0.5 billion — will be provided by the UK Government? Can the Minister tell us whether that is the case? Further analysis of the figures appears to be redundant if additional sums not included in the Estimates or the Bill are to be found elsewhere. That is what everybody has been saying: there is a hole in the Budget. There is a commitment to do various activities, yet there does not appear to be the resources to deal with them.

The aim to reduce the number of NEETs by 10,000 would have a significant impact on the claimant level, but is it sustainable? That is the real issue. Can we actually tackle youth unemployment and unemployment in general? Do we have the resources? Do we have the will? In fact, when I read the EAG's annual report, what it said was that it depends on whether there is ministerial ownership of the targets and whether Departments work together to actually tackle the issues. I cannot tell from the information put before me, and I ask the Minister directly to explain those issues.

I would like to put other issues connected with DETI and finance to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The economic advisory group informs us that the biggest challenge facing the development of the economy appears to be access to finance. Twenty-five per cent of the people who were surveyed said that that was the number one problem. I am interested to see whether the Bill will address these issues.

5.15 pm

It is interesting that the second item that it wants to deal with is government red tape. I see no provision for dealing with red tape, the red tape that is throttling our businesses. The economic advisory group outlines a particular concern that UK national initiatives are not working effectively in Northern Ireland. In particular, few Northern Ireland banks have access to the funding for lending scheme. Only

the Ulster Bank, as I understand it, is making use of it through RBS; the other banks are not making use of it for various reasons or are delayed in accessing it. How is that tackling the lack of economic growth, which the Bill should be dealing with?

There is also little awareness of the enterprise finance guarantee scheme and the Better Business Finance initiatives. What schemes will the Minister of Finance and Personnel bring forward that are appropriate to Northern Ireland? He says that he is dealing with these issues, but I do not see them addressed in the Estimates or the Bill.

Many of the underlying problems with access to finance in Northern Ireland revolve around the fact that there is a high level of property debt in what might otherwise be sound trading businesses. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how the Executive plan to deal with that issue. Those businesses are sound, can invest if given the money and can move forward. I talked today to WhiteRock Capital Partners about how we get the loan guarantee scheme or whatever, but is £10 million out of a £50 million pot over five years sufficient? We need to do more.

I hear that there are proposals to establish a new business bank geared specifically towards lending to small business in the United Kingdom. Where is our part to play in that? Where is our bank that will lend to our small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the bedrock of our society and our enterprise? What will the Bill do to address those issues?

The EAG goes on to say:

"There is also evidence of an under supply of equity finance".

That is particularly the case for new, high-growth start-up companies. That is an issue that we ought to address if we are serious about creating employment.

Finally, in his submission yesterday, the Minister rather casually said that he was looking for a "c"; there was some "c" missing. The "c" was for "competitive" — the Northern Ireland competitive index. Amongst other things, it reveals that, in a ranking from one to 142, the United Kingdom was eighth, Ireland had fallen to twenty-seventh and Northern Ireland was forty-second. So, when the Minister actually has a look at the competitive index for Northern Ireland, which his advisers brought together, can he tell me whether he thinks that it is

appropriate and, if so, whether we are making progress?

The challenge for the Assembly, led by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, is to understand that there is really serious hurt in our society, people feel desperate, households are under pressure and there is concern about jobs and welfare. There are all sorts of pressures on every Department, but we do not have a coherent response to that. No matter how the Finance Minister dresses this up with his wisecracks and his little "Oh, it is OK; I will go and do this", it does not take away from the fact that our economy is lagging behind the recovery in the rest of the United Kingdom. It was first into recession, and it will be last out of recession. We are not doing a good enough job, and the Bill does not address the issues.

I cannot form an opinion on the Bill because, like everybody else in the Chamber, I do not have sufficient information. This is a sham; it is going through the process of pretending that we will deal with the issues when we will not. So, I put this challenge to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who normally does not bother to respond to me because he thinks that the way to go and do —

Mr Wilson: Because you are a fool.

Mr B McCrea: He thinks that the way to go and do politics —

Mr Wilson: Why? Because you are a fool.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am absolutely happy to take an intervention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member will resume his seat. I remind Members — that includes Ministers — that they should not shout across the Chamber. Continue, Mr McCrea.

Mr Wilson: He wanted me to respond to him.

Mr B McCrea: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I thought that the Minister was still in full flow there. I could have sworn for one minute that he wanted to carry on with his discussion about being a fool. We will see who is a fool.

This is mid-term for this Executive and Assembly, but there are challenges out there about who is doing what for the people of Northern Ireland. No amount of smoke and mirrors, no amount of bluster will turn this around if you cannot create jobs. Our unemployment is not responding to the things

that we need it to respond to. It is your responsibility; you need to do something about it; and the Executive need to come together as one and tell us how they will address the problems facing the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Allister. I remind Members to make all remarks through the Chair, please. If a Member wishes to intervene, they can ask the Member to give way.

Mr Allister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that I will struggle with the task, but it seems, after the last few minutes, that I might have to bring some decorum and level-headedness to the debate.

Mr Wilson: As you always do.

Mr Allister: As I always do. I will struggle to do the best I can in that regard.

I have to say that I think that Mr McCrea makes some valid points. He makes a valid point about the predictability of this entire process. By its nature, a Budget will have large elements that are entirely predictable, but, in truth, you could probably take the Budget of last year, tweak a few figures, take the speeches of last year and substitute them for today's — some might say that you would be able to do the same with mine, and maybe that is so — and, really, it would be hard to spot the difference. That is because the predictability around this process lies in the fact that we do not have, in this House, the mechanisms or the personnel motivated to challenge because of the consequence that all but a handful have the same vested interests of being in the Government to whom this Budget belongs.

The point has been made, correctly, that there are some in this debate who seek to ride two horses. There are some in the debate who seek to make valiant, even vigorous, criticisms, of this Budget, and yet it is their Budget because it is the Budget of the Government of which they are a part. Of course, if we did come to a Division, they would be among the first to troop loyally through the Ayes Lobby, setting in a particular context the validity, the sincerity and the strength of the criticisms that they make. Yes, those criticisms might read well in the local paper; they might touch a few buttons with people who think, "Yes, it is right to be exercised about that"; but put it to the test in this House, and you will find that the very people who make those criticisms will do nothing to implement them. They will be among those sustaining and retaining this Budget and

this Government whose Budget it is. Those points made by Mr McCrea are particularly and properly made, and I join in endorsing them.

As to the predictability, the lines of this Budget are almost at one, year on year, apart from some tweaks of the figures. Some of the figures are for quite staggering amounts. A point that always occurs to me — I have made it before, and I will make it again — is this: where does all this money come from? It comes from taxpayers. It comes from British taxpayers. It comes from people in this Province, but not just in this Province. It comes from people in other parts of the United Kingdom. One of the benefits of being a part of the United Kingdom is that we can draw down funding of the scale and nature — to the tune of more than £16.5 billion — that is manifested in the Budget. What would the figures be if those in the House who live in a fantasy world and aspire to a united Ireland had their way? What figures would there be for health, education, roads or anything, if that were the source of the finance? Happily, it is not; it is that solid reliable source that is the Union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Long may it continue.

I referred to predictability. Maybe it is a reflection of what a sad individual I am, but, when I read the fine print of schedules 1 and 2 relating to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — I cannot explain why my eye is always drawn to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — I was a little surprised to see that one of the groups that we are going to fund with the £48 million is the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. Unless I am badly mistaken, the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund went out of existence at the end of the last financial year. Yet, we have a line in the Budget to support the Victims and Survivors Service and the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. No doubt, there is a good explanation, but it escaped me in my reading of it.

I am less than impressed by the Victims and Survivors Service thus far in its allocation of funding. Over the coming weeks, it will become clear that there will be considerable disquiet over the comparative levels of funding allocated to innocent victims' groups and non-innocent victims' groups by the Victims and Survivors Service. Some of the letters of offer have been very generous to groups that, in my definition, are not victims' groups at all because they involve the victim makers and perpetrators. That is in contrast to the refusals of funding to genuine victims' groups. The Victims and Survivors Service is not covering itself in glory in that regard.

I was also disappointed today to receive an answer that indicates that there is an imbalance in the staff of the service. Of the 32 staff employed in the Victims and Survivors Service, 16 — 50% — come from the Catholic community, and only 11 come from the Protestant community, which is one third. Why should that be? I was also disappointed that answers received today from OFMDFM state that it is unable to give community background figures for the staff of the groups that it funds. We lavish huge amounts of money on the Pat Finucane Centre, Relatives for Justice and an endless list of groups such as those, and yet OFMDFM does not know and looks like it does not care what the community background is of the holders of posts that it funds. Why should that be? We live in a community in which there is supposed to be accountability for all those issues, but that seems not to be the case in that most sensitive area that pertains to what is called the Victims and Survivors Service. That is a matter of concern.

5.30 pm

Before I leave OFMDFM, let me say that I am, of course, not surprised but disappointed again to see the lavish funding for the Maze/Long Kesh project. If ever there was a waste of £18 million of European money — our money, I might say, that has been recycled and returned to us — it is the funding on that project. It is going to blight that valuable site. It is going to blight it, because the truth, as was conceded last Friday when a group was taken around the Maze site by the First Minister and one Mr Jeffrey Donaldson, is that the price of getting anything on the 360 acres was to agree to the peace and reconciliation centre. That made the point that, as ever, the Sinn Féin veto drives that and many other agendas. That is why that project, if it is needed at all, has been placed not on a neutral site where it would be untarnished but on the most divisive site that you can find, which is at the Maze. The price of getting Balmoral Park and a food park and all the benefits that could flow from that was to agree to a peace and reconciliation centre. That, of course, underscores the tawdry nature of government in this part of the United Kingdom. If ever there was a waste of £18 million of European money, that is it.

In that context, it is interesting that the First Minister is reported to have told a 'Financial Times' journalist today that, although he is Eurosceptic — wait for it — he does not want the United Kingdom to leave the EU. Maybe that is not a surprise. It is a bit like saying that you are against the Belfast agreement but want to keep on operating it. Where have we seen

that before? I have to say that, if one is Eurosceptic and does not want to tie oneself to the totally suffocating pressures and bureaucracy of the European Union, I am surprised at the reporting of such a comment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. I encourage the Member to return to the Bill.

Mr Allister: If I must, but this was much more interesting, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]* Let me return to health. Of course, writ large through the Budget is the funding of what is grandly called Transforming Your Care. Maybe it would be more aptly called "Transferring Your Care". That seems to be the ethos of much of it. I think, in particular, of the care home saga that emerged in recent weeks and months. It is quite clear that the purpose of this Minister of Health and the Department under his guidance is to disengage the health service from care home provision. I think that that is wrong.

If we value the health service, and I hope that we all do, I believe that a portion of care home provision needs to be retained in that service. Otherwise, we invite the near calamity that occurred in GB when Southern Cross collapsed and 750 homes were under immediate threat and there was all sorts of scurrying around to find a solution to keep the roof over the heads of those who lived in those homes. To go down an exclusively privatised route for care homes is a retrograde step. Yes, there is a place for private care for those who wish to avail themselves of it. However, for the private sector to monopolise care homes is wrong. It will drive up prices and drive down standards, and the health service must retain care home provision.

I note, again from some answers received, that it has quite clearly been a stratagem to squeeze those homes out. That is why one such home — Pinewood in Ballymena — has not had a single admission of a full-time resident in five years. Yes, it takes people in for respite and intermediate care, and, as an aside, should state care homes close, I see no provision for where the respite and intermediate beds will be provided. State homes are being run down to the point at which there is a handful of people in them, and Ministers will then step forward and say, "What can we do about it? They are not viable. They have to close." It is a stratagem of closure; closure by stealth is what we are seeing.

Not so long ago, when the previous Health Minister was apparently going down that road, there was uproar from the Benches of the

Minister who is now going down the same road. There were public meetings — including one in Larne in the Finance Minister's constituency — where people gathered to protest the threat to a particular care home there. There was another such public meeting just recently because of the same threat, this time from the Health Minister. Not a single DUP representative came to express any concern at that meeting, because the policy has now been somersaulted on. What was a good stick with which to beat Mr McGimpsey is now a crutch to get them to the same point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry to remind the Member that he is once again focusing on a particular constituency issue, and the guidance is not to do that but to focus on the Bill. Continue.

Mr Allister: I would have thought that the issue of care homes is something that affects all constituencies, and, in the same breath, I think that I referred to one in north Antrim and one in east Antrim. However, I take your guidance.

Mr McIlveen seemed to take exception to some comments from another Member about the job provision figures. For years, we have had this sales pitch about the number of jobs promoted, which is very interesting and always far more impressive but not as informative as the number of jobs actually created. That is the real test. It is not about how many jobs you are promised by some inward investor to whom you promised millions in return. It is about how many jobs are created — not just how many are created but how many last. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI indicate that they are taking some steps towards revealing those sorts of figures. That is exactly the sort of information required to judge whether the inward investment programme is working. Otherwise, we can but judge it against the fact that, for all the announcements, unemployment is still rising.

We are still in the position of being one of the worst parts of the United Kingdom when it comes to unemployment levels. We are still in the position of being one of the worst parts of the United Kingdom when it comes to economic inactivity. Those statistics burden this Budget greatly with the amount that, in consequence, must go on benefits and is therefore not available for any other sort of spend.

I do not intend to speak much longer. I am sure that is good for all concerned, although I did notice, about an hour ago, that the Minister was looking very jaded with the debate. I hope that the last couple of interventions have at least got his attention. I suspect that they also got his

wrath, and we will know that shortly. Why delay the moment any more?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Dolores Kelly. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs D Kelly: Leave the best wine until last, perhaps.

I am sure that the Finance Minister will share my concerns, and those of all Members of the House, about the financial probity and scandals that have emerged in recent days; for example, in the Housing Executive and, indeed, in the north-west waste facility, where organised crime has moved into the waste disposal industry in a big way. We recognise that there are only 14 environmental crime officers in the Department of the Environment (DOE). In relation to the Bill and the previous reduction of resources in the Audit Office, will the Minister reconsider those reductions in light of the two scandals in recent days and build public confidence that we are shining a light into some very dark places and very dark practices?

On that matter, I want to be disassociated from the comments of Mr Allister on the amount spent on some victims' and survivors' groups. I want to pay tribute in particular to the Pat Finucane Centre and Relatives for Justice, which require that funding in order to stand up against the forces of the British establishment and the worst practices of the past so that we can begin to learn some of the truth of what happened.

As regards victims and survivors, and the amount of funding; is the Minister convinced that the way in which funding has been delivered is meeting the real needs of victims? I am very aware of the identified needs, and assessment has been made by the victims' commission and others. However, in my constituency, access to housing is one example. Having the surety of social housing to the end of their days is all that some victims actually want. They do not want to have to worry about where they are going to live. They want to live out the rest of their lives in confidence and with some degree of security. Is there any scope in how resources are allocated and in the criteria set? Can any of this be within the guidance of the Finance Minister?

Further, does the Finance Minister share my concerns about the non-delivery of the social investment fund? I understand that it has now moved across into Delivering Social Change. A recent question that I tabled revealed that almost £250,000 was spent on management

fees but none on project delivery. Is the Minister confident that the business cases presented will stand up to scrutiny? Has he any concerns about what some call the 20% surcharge — or, as others call it, a management fee — that is given out, it would appear, to some favoured groups to deliver the projects, but not necessarily to those who came forward with the ideas?

I have to answer Mr Allister in relation to North/South bodies. I think we all know that they can deliver value for money if given the opportunities to do so. Indeed, there are economies of scale that can be delivered across the island of Ireland. The paediatric children's services are a case in point. That is a pragmatic example of where we can deliver best for people who need an urgent service at some of the worst and most distressful times of their lives.

There has been quite a lot of debate this afternoon. I do not want to add an awful lot more, except to ask the Finance Minister: in relation to the £600 million that is predicted to be taken out of the Northern Ireland economy via the welfare reforms, how does the Budget Bill address those very real concerns and experiences of ordinary citizens?

5.45 pm

The Westminster Government recently made it possible for people to pay their rates over 12 months, rather than the 10-month period that applies in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister of Finance and Personnel have any plans to introduce a system whereby people can pay by direct debit over 12 months to spread the cost a bit more?

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. In particular, since he asked for some acknowledgement, I thank Mr Allister, as well as Mr McCrea, for waking me from the doze into which I had been induced during the grand tour of every school, nursing home and pothole in east Antrim when Roy Beggs was speaking. That will be the last thing that I will appreciate hearing from them, but I appreciate that they woke me and got me interested in the debate again. I hope that I will be able to respond to them later on.

I will very quickly go through some of the points that Members made. I note that many of those who made contributions are, of course, no longer present in the Chamber; I may respond to their comments or I may not, depending on how we get on.

The Chairman of the Committee raised a number of points and talked about the importance of Committee scrutiny, as did a lot of other Members who talked about the passage of this Bill. Mr McCrea was very critical and said that the process was a sham because Members could not have any scrutiny of the Bill. Of course, if he was sitting watching the TV and tweeting on Twitter, as he was yesterday, he would not have had the opportunity to read through the documents and apprise himself of the details.

After the information goes to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, it is available from the Business Office for all Members. However, from the point of view of individual Committees, departmental Estimates should be available for their prior knowledge before the information goes to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. After that, it is available in its full form for all Members of the Assembly. I have no difficulty with scrutiny of the Budget. In fact, I think that that is essential, not only when the Budget is presented, but on an ongoing basis.

I will let the Member get in front of the TV cameras here. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Bell: Do you want me to speak for you? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: It is important that we not only have proper scrutiny of the Budget when it is presented but of ongoing savings delivery plans, etc, and Committees should look at bids that are made during the year.

Mr McKay also raised the issue of the memorandum of understanding on the Budget process. That is important, but we have to be careful that it does not restrict the Executive's timescale for the delivery of the Budget.

A number of Members talked about Transforming Your Care, the delivery of services and the closure of statutory residential homes. There is a misunderstanding. The whole idea of Transforming Your Care and addressing what will happen to residential homes was, first, to try to ensure that we had an arrangement in place — the Health Minister has emphasised this time and time again — that allowed people to stay in their homes as long as they could. That is, of course the aim and object of most families for their loved ones. It is the aim and objective of most people. I have yet to find a resident, a constituent or anyone in my family who actually wants to get into a nursing home.

People want to stay in the environment in which they are most comfortable. If we are to aim for that, there are consequences for the way in which care is delivered. That means greater resources must be made available to keep people at home and support them there. If that is the case, you need fewer residential places, but they should be of the highest possible standard. Many residential homes are old and require substantial capital investment. In today's debate, a number of Members from all parties — well, from most parties, anyway — have talked about how we could find additional resources. One way is through private sector provision, which makes sense if the strategy is to keep people at home for as long as possible and make sure that, if they need to go into residential care, it is of the best possible standard. So we need to make capital improvements to the existing care. If the private sector is prepared to provide that, it releases some of the burden on budgets so that money can be released to do other things. To me, that is a reasonable way forward. If Members actually thought about it and the public were properly informed, it could be regarded as a way forward.

Mr McKay also raised the issue of rural fire stations, and I understand that the Health Minister is looking at that, but projects will be dependent on the budget available to him. Mr McKay also raised the very important issue of public sector pensions. It is essential that we take the legislation forward. Fortunately, a paper was agreed by the Executive last week, which should allow the legislative process to start. We have to have the provision in place by 2015, which means that we need Royal Assent for the Bill by April 2014 to get the regulations through. Again, huge penalties will be imposed on the Assembly if we do not get the legislation through in time.

A number of Members raised the issue of the A26, which I dealt with yesterday when Mr Allister raised it. There is money from the A5 that has to be spent this year. The A26 scheme lies well beyond the 2013-14 financial year, and, therefore, any funding for that will be dependent on what the Executive decide on capital funding as a whole, the priorities that the Minister for Regional Development sets and the funding available in the next couple of financial years.

Mr Weir raised the issue of the £18 billion capital commitment. As a result of additional capital allocations made over the Budget period, the assurances that we have on the increased capital moneys that will be available after the current Budget period, and the fact

that the Government will put more emphasis on capital spending, it looks more likely that we will achieve the £18 billion spend over the 2005-2017 period. Of course, there is still some uncertainty, but some of the gap has been closed.

Mr Weir also raised the issue of business rate support. I will come to this later, but Mr McCrea asked a lot of questions, without giving very many answers, about where in the Budget was the provision to support the economy. Here is one area in which the Executive have supported businesses across Northern Ireland at a time of recession and in a way and to a degree that has not happened in any other part of the United Kingdom. We have frozen local taxation for businesses. We have reduced rates for 50% of businesses by 20%. We have given new businesses an incentive to open in empty premises by giving them a rates reduction of 50%. Those are the kinds of measures that we have taken to support local businesses in the Budget. That means that we forgo the revenue that would have come from those businesses, and we are talking about tens of millions of pounds' worth of revenue being left in the pockets of businesses to help them reduce their overheads at a time of economic recession. That has been welcomed by a whole range of business organisations across Northern Ireland. That is only one example, and I will come to other examples as I go through the response to the speeches that people have made.

Mr Weir asked about the fiscal position. Sinn Féin Members do not like to hear this, and Mr Allister reminded them of it in his speech, but the value of being a member of the United Kingdom is that, of the £18 billion that we have in the Budget, £10.5 billion comes from the Exchequer and is over and above the revenue raised in Northern Ireland. That is the value of being part of the United Kingdom. As a unionist and as someone who takes a realistic view of the importance of having measures to deal with economic problems in Northern Ireland, it is worth emphasising that point time and time again. I was glad that Mr Weir raised that issue.

Mr Bradley talked about the childcare strategy. The consultation that started on that in December 2013 has finished, the principles have been established, and I have been informed that an announcement by the OFMDFM Ministers is expected shortly. So, I cannot make any comment on the detail of that. He also came back to the issue of revenue raising. He keeps repeating that there is £1.6 billion of additional money to be raised. That

was not a commitment made by the Executive, and it was not a figure that was given by me. It was a figure that I admit was thrown out by the Member for South Down Catriona Ruane. If he wants to ask about the £1.6 billion, let him get an explanation from her. The figures that we have given —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will let you intervene in a minute.

I stated, and the Budget documents state, that, over the four years, £900 million would be raised in additional revenue. We have exceeded the target that we set for ourselves in the first two years. We set a target because some of those revenue streams would have taken some time to generate, but we have exceeded it and have raised £422 million. The Member is quite right that that leaves us with £478 million — at least his maths was correct — to raise, and that can be raised in the remaining Budget period.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. There was a figure of £1.6 billion mentioned at the beginning. When I questioned the Minister about that, he said that he had identified £862 million that he thought could be realised and that he was not including any proposals in the Budget that were not realistic. I was asking him about the £862 million. He explained to me yesterday that around £400 million of that had been realised, so I am asking him whether we are on course to realise the rest of the figure.

6.00 pm

Mr Wilson: As much as anyone can look into the future and say what will happen, yes, we are. We are ahead of the game at the moment, and the fact that we have exceeded our targets in the first two years gives me some confidence that the £900 million can be achieved. The veracity of the answer that I have given to that question will be better understood in two years' time when we see the performance. However, the performance to date has been encouraging in that, even at a time when we have been in economic difficulties, we have raised more revenue than we expected during the first two years of the Budget.

He also raised, as did Mrs Overend, the issue of the £18 million that DETI was not able to draw down as EU funding, and he said that we will have to look for different ways of raising that. I gave an answer to that yesterday, and I cannot give any further information on it. We

are looking at ways in which that money could be spent on alternative projects, and I hope that we will be in a position to update the Assembly in the June monitoring round. I cannot say what will be in the June monitoring round, but I am hopeful that we can make some announcements on that in the June monitoring round in a couple of weeks.

Mrs Overend raised a number of issues. She talked about the economic difficulties that we are in and the recession and said that the Budget is not strong enough to reverse that trend. I say to her and to Mr McCrea, who was at the same nonsense in his speech, that we are a regional economy and we are dealing with a global recession and worldwide banking crisis. I do not think that I, as Finance Minister, have ever claimed, nor would I ever be silly enough to claim, that, even though our Budget involves £18 billion of spend, it will ever be sufficient to reverse all the weight of the global economic pressures on an economy such as ours, especially an open economy that is, therefore, very susceptible to the fortunes of other parts of the world. Arlene Foster is making strident attempts to change the focus, but our economy is very dependent on trade with Europe, the Irish Republic and all those economies that have been particularly badly hit by the euro zone crisis, the banking crisis —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a minute or two.

No one will pretend that this Budget is capable of reversing the trend. In the Budget, we have tried to look at how some spending and some redirection of spending can make a difference. I have given one example, and I will give more examples during this speech of what we have done with business rates and how many businesses have said that that has enabled them to start up in empty premises or enabled them to keep on going. I will give way.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate the Minister giving way. He made the point that Northern Ireland is a small regional economy that is buffeted by the winds of the global economy. The Northern Ireland competitive index, which takes into account the issue that the Minister talked about yesterday, tries to address those issues. It puts us at forty-second, behind the United Kingdom at eighth and Ireland at twenty-seventh. Do you think that that is a good index and the right way for us to judge our competitiveness for the future, bearing in mind that that is advice from the Economic Advisory Group?

Mr Wilson: I do not have the detail of which index he is talking about. The index that he mentioned contains many different measures of how Northern Ireland compares with other regional economies in the world. Of course, we perform very highly in some areas and lower in others. All I can say to him is that we have sought to address many of the issues that businesses have brought to us. I have already mentioned one of those, and I will come on to some of the other points that he made in his speech later.

Mrs Overend also raised the issue of the £18 million for the Titanic signature project, and I think that I have given an answer on that. I was a bit unclear about where she was on the case of alternative finance. It was unfortunate that she took an intervention from her colleague Mr Beggs because, on one hand, we were being encouraged, as other Members have encouraged us, to look at alternative financing, at alternative models and at how we can get the private sector involved. On the other hand, of course, as soon as we try to get the private sector involved, we are criticised for it.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a moment or two. Let me just deal with the issue of private funding. Of course, the Health Minister has taken the decision to pilot two projects, in Newry and in Lisburn, using private finance. The issue of value for money is marginal on those and is why he has had to give a direction on the issue. I have supported him on giving that direction, because, unless we are prepared to look at some pilots and see how they work out, we will not know whether that is a particular way forward.

This is where I find the intervention from the Member for East Antrim most surprising. He has been campaigning for similar centres in Carrickfergus and Larne, and he knows full well that, if we are going to have to rely on traditional capital funding for those, the money will not be available for some time and we will have to look for money. Indeed, even some of the health professionals in the area have said that we should look at other ways of doing this. So, he cannot criticise the Health Minister for taking forward pilots that might actually benefit his constituency, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, say that he wants to have some of this in his constituency. It is one of these cases of wanting to have your cake and eat it. On the one hand, you advocate private finance and, on the other hand, as soon as you start going down that road, you try to find every hole in the argument to oppose it. I will give way to the

Member, because I hope to get an explanation from him.

Mr Beggs: If the Minister were to look very carefully at what I said, he would know that I was arguing that there should be a clear business case and that it should be a transparent process. Will he not accept that one of the difficulties in this process is that there has been no business case? In fact, the Health Committee was told that no business case is available to date. So, if there is such a marginal issue, why has there not been transparency about it?

The other aspect that I would have thought could well affect the business case is that I am told that many of the GPs in Newry own their own property at present. Why, if there needs to be a pilot, is it not in somewhere such as Carrickfergus, where there is a publicly-owned health centre that is 1960s-based and is operating at perhaps two or three times the capacity it should be operating at and where, I would have thought, the business case would stand up?

Mr Wilson: Let us have this decision made. It really does not matter whether it stacks up or does not stack up. Provided it does not stack up in Carrickfergus, it is better than it not stacking up in Lisburn or Newry. This seems to be the argument that the Member is making.

The process has been clearly transparent. The Minister has made it quite clear that these are decisions that, strictly on value-for-money terms, would not go forward. That is why he has given a direction. The process is transparent enough there. The Minister has taken a risk, and he has done so because he wants to establish whether, once we see these things in operation, this is a model that could be used for the other health centres that he wants to spread across Northern Ireland. Of course, that would then help to deal with some of the issues that the Member raised about waiting time, etc, because the quicker that you can do a lot of the primary care and other small medical procedures in these health centres, the less pressure you put on traditional accident and emergency centres in hospitals.

That was the thinking behind it, and I think that it is worth highlighting the Ulster Unionist Party's confusion on alternative finance.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Since the Member raised the issue, I will give way.

Mrs Overend: Thank you, Minister. Let me clarify: I asked what ongoing active engagement there is with investors about alternative finance to bring inward investment and suchlike to Northern Ireland and whether he could give any examples.

Mr Wilson: A number of PFI schemes have been used in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, in the current climate, the options for private finance are extremely limited, which I have said time and again in the Assembly. Many of those who wish to engage in private finance can do so only if they can raise money at very high interest rates, so the charges to us are much higher than you would expect. In some cases, when the scheme is seen by the Treasury as simply bringing money from the private sector in the form of direct loans to the Government, we lose that from the block grant, which is not to our advantage. Why would we take money out of the block grant, which we get for nothing, and replace it with private finance on which we have to pay interest? Those are some of the issues.

When money can be had for a scheme, it is sometimes very expensive. When loans are offered for capital schemes, the Treasury deems that that will score against the block grant, and we finish up paying interest and lose the capital that we would normally get from central government. That has made it very difficult to identify huge sources of private finance. The method that Edwin Poots used for the Newry and Lisburn health centres has been one way to experiment with private sources of finance to see if that might be a way to roll in some extra money in the future.

At least Mr Lunn told us at the very start that he was going to be negative, and I have to say that he lived up to his promise. Mr O'Loan, who used to epitomise negativity in the Assembly, is long gone. He was a master of negativity. However, Mr Lunn even exceeded Mr O'Loan's speeches. When he ran out of current things to be negative about, he started to delve into history. We went back to the Bangor railway and to Balmoral High School. The Balmoral High School issue was about 15 years ago, before the Assembly was even set up. He delved right back in to find examples, in his view, of public finance being used in a way in which it should not have been used.

Mr Lunn did raise a number of issues that I want to deal with. He talked about the RPA. What is happening with the RPA? Why the delay? Actually, there is no delay: we will have elections next year. The Executive have already tried to help the process along with

additional funding of £47.8 million, some of which will go towards transition costs, which should encourage councils to get on with the work that they have to do before next year's elections. There is £30 million for rates convergence. We found that additional money, even at a time when there were pressures on the Budget. That is how seriously the RPA is being taken, and we are on track to achieve the objectives and the timescale that we set out.

Mr Lunn mentioned the building of a united community and the First Minister and deputy First Minister's proposals that were published in May. That was debated quite a lot yesterday. It is a high-level strategic document, and as happens with most proposals of that type, detailed work is now being done. The detailed costings are being worked out, and, if there are financial implications for this year, they will have to be dealt with either in monitoring rounds or by some other sources of finance being made available. When the Government were talking about the economic pact, we know that they linked some of what they were likely to do with what is done to promote the shared future. I am sure that they have that in mind as well, and, in their discussions with the Prime Minister, I am sure that they will draw attention to that issue.

6.15 pm

He also raised the issue of the £18 million for the Housing Executive, as did Mrs Kelly, and he wanted to know what percentage of that was of the total budget. Given that the total maintenance budget over the period of the contract was £172 million, it represents about £10 million of that total budget. Of course, that has nothing to do with the fact that money has not been allocated to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, as Mrs Kelly suggested. In this year's Budget, the full amount of money that the Audit Office bid for has been allocated. Mr Kinahan accepted that yesterday. The Audit Office underspent its budget by 10% in the four previous years.

If Mrs Kelly is looking for some way to point her finger or someone to point her finger at, maybe she should bear in mind that the contracts that we are talking about started when a Member of her party was the Minister for Social Development. It then appears that the problem with waste disposal and the fraud occurred during the time when he was the Minister for the Environment. So if she is looking for somebody to ask questions of on this issue and on the allocation of finance to the Audit Office, she should maybe not ask me but have a conversation with her own party colleague.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will certainly.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister has been entirely disingenuous in his last comments. The Minister is very well aware that my party colleagues initiated investigations that uncovered the fraud. Indeed, when I spoke about resourcing the Audit Office, I was talking about the scale of those types of scandals. Can the Minister assure the House that there are sufficient resources to allow scrutiny across all Departments and arm's-length bodies? Minister, I think that you were entirely wrong and mischievous in the extreme in your last comments.

Mr Wilson: I have never been called "mischievous" in the House before. I am sure that the Member knows that. I was simply making an observation that, if there are issues with waste fraud and maintenance overspends, the buck maybe rests with the Minister who was responsible when the contracts were signed or when the fraud occurred. Indeed, I would point out that one of the contracts that was signed over by her party colleague who was the Minister for Social Development at that time was to one of the firms that was named in the report yesterday. All I am saying is that, if questions are to be asked on this, make sure that they are asked of the right individual. As far as I am concerned, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has been allocated the funding that was required and that it asked for. It has underspent its funding in previous years.

Mr Spratt raised the issue of A5 funding. The Minister for Regional Development tabled a number of bids in the June monitoring round for projects. How the A5 money is allocated is not entirely up to me; it is up to the Executive as well. He also raised the issue of roads maintenance. If you look at the record of roads maintenance, you will see that we have spent record amounts on roads maintenance — £109 million in 2012-13 and £120 million in 2011-12.

He also raised the issue of the Translink deficit. PEDU is looking Translink, and it will carry out a further efficiency review. Once that review is completed, I hope that significant savings will be identified in Translink.

Mr Storey spoke about the maintenance backlog in schools. Some £37 million was committed to maintenance in the Budget in this financial year, and additional moneys are allocated when available to deal with the maintenance backlog. In fact, it is significant

that part of last year's monitoring process led to an extra £10 million being made available for that. He also raised the issues of savings delivery plans and efficiency delivery plans. I have encouraged Ministers and Departments to co-operate with the presentation of the delivery plans and their scrutiny.

The changes to school funding were announced by the Minister today. Many Members have some concern about the small schools element, although I understand that the Minister has rejected that part of the proposals and will be bringing forward detailed proposals for consultation over the next number of weeks.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for giving way. Mr Storey and I had an exchange of views about the ESA Bill, which is one of the long-delayed matters that I referred to in my speech, but the Minister has not responded on that point. Does he have any views about the delay with ESA and the financial implications of that?

Mr Wilson: As far as the financial implications of ESA are concerned, there were to be administrative savings as a result of having one education body to deal with schools rather than five education and library boards plus all the other bodies. Not only the financial implications but the powers of ESA and the structure of and safeguards for particular schools are important. I am not past the detail of the Bill, but I understand that the Committee made certain recommendations, which hopefully the Minister will have responded to. The reason that the Bill has not come back to the Assembly is that he knows that there is still strong opposition to issues, and those issues have not been resolved.

I am keen to see the administrative savings, but I understand that the Bill will shape the structure of educational governance for years ahead. Therefore, we cannot deal with it flippantly. We also cannot afford to have it pushed through without the real issues, which I am sure many Members have been lobbied on by various school sectors, having been dealt with. All that I will say in response to the Member is that the issue is primarily between the Education Minister and those who listened to all the evidence while the Bill was being scrutinised and made certain recommendations. I hope that sense will prevail so that the Bill can finally come to the Assembly in a form that is acceptable and accepted. Then the process can be got on with.

Mr Lunn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes; I will.

Mr Lunn: It is really an issue between the Minister's party and Sinn Féin. That is where the ESA Bill rests at the moment. I know that there are political implications, and I have tried to avoid those today, but the administrative savings and the whole structure of education, in my humble opinion, are crumbling. I know that we are still managing to get good results somehow out of it, and that is a credit to the people who work in the system, as Mr Storey has often said.

The problem at the moment is that it is stuck in the Executive between the two major parties, and the other three parties do not know what is going on. It has been that way for two months. The Education Committee did not so much put forward proposals on the important issues as find itself not able to reach a consensus on them because of differences in the interpretation of the so-called heads of agreement.

Mr Wilson: I am surprised that you have not called us to order, Mr Deputy Speaker, because this is not particularly relevant to the Budget (No. 2) Bill. However, I will say that it is not just an issue between the DUP and Sinn Féin. I have also heard significant criticism from the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and your party. Therefore, it is not just an issue between this party and Sinn Féin.

Mr Byrne spoke about access to finance. I agree with him that it is a critical issue. Funds have already been made available through the business growth fund and other funds through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I understand that Arlene Foster is developing similar schemes and will be applying for funding for some of them. I mentioned one yesterday with the agrifood industry where it is hoped that the Executive will be able to make some provision for giving access to funds and encouraging banks to release funds to supplement what the Executive do to help that important sector of the economy to grow. He raised the issue of the A2 at Enniskillen. I am not aware of all the details but I was informed that road schemes were recently undertaken around Enniskillen, including the realignment and widening of the A32 Shannaragh Road, as part of the works to improve travelling time between Omagh and Enniskillen. That will improve access to the new hospital as well. The last time I was down,

they were doing a lot of resurfacing along the main road to Belfast, too, which, hopefully, will at least make the journey a bit smoother.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way. He referred earlier to the restrictions and difficulties of trying to raise external finance for here. Is any serious thought being given to having some sort of Northern Ireland government bond, given that the savings ratio is so high generally in the community and interest rates have never been more beneficial for those who may create such a bond?

Mr Wilson: I referred to that in response to Mrs Overend's point. Raising money through a Northern Ireland government bond would only displace money that comes from Westminster. We would be paying interest on it, whereas we get capital money for nothing from Westminster. Treasury rules make it difficult for us to raise money in that way.

One method available to us is RRI borrowing, which we use to the full. When we use it, we have to bear in mind that it has implications for revenue in future years because of the servicing of the loans. We could ask for additional borrowing powers. I do not know what the Government's response would be, but those would score against total UK borrowing at a time when the Government are trying to get borrowing down. They would probably be reluctant to look at that. That is a similar way of raising the money but it has implications for revenue spending.

Mr McIlveen raised the issue of the economic conditions and outlook. Mr Allister and Mr McCrea tried to rubbish the job promotion that is going on, and Mrs Overend raised questions about it. Substantial new job announcements have been made by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment over the past number of months. Some are with brand new investors. Some are with investors who came here and showed their confidence in the economy by increasing their employee numbers. For example, Allstate came, saw what was available in Northern Ireland, employed hundreds of people, and has now given an indication of its confidence in the economy by increasing its investment. That is as a result of the hard work done by Invest Northern Ireland, and by the Minister who has been tireless in her promotion of Northern Ireland.

Mr McIlveen and a number of others raised the issue of resources for the G8 summit. We have secured agreements from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the contribution that it will make towards security costs. Those costs are

not yet fully defined and there is still an ongoing conversation. However, the one thing that has been clear in the conversation is a recognition that this is not a Northern Ireland event and should, therefore, be funded primarily by resources from the Treasury.

6.30 pm

Mr Beggs gave us a tour of east Antrim and the various problems faced there. Schools, nursing homes — nothing escaped — as he held us, riveted, on the details of the problems that that constituency faces. Of course, I am well aware of the problems, as one of the Members for the area.

He raised the issue of the Estimates being scrutinised by Committees. As I pointed out, although a combined Estimate was not available until 29 May, individual Departments should have been making available their Estimates for scrutiny by their Committee, so the type of detail that he wanted should have been available. If that is not happening, I am sure that Committees and he himself can be assertive in demanding that type of information from Ministers.

He also raised the issue of accident and emergency provision. There are, on average, 59,000 attendances at emergency departments every month and 10,000 admissions to hospital from those departments. I acknowledge, because I hear from constituents as well, the length of waiting times and the conditions in which people wait, but the situation has improved. From January to March 2012, there were 4,017 breaches of the 12-hour waiting time. By this year, that figure was down to 2,360 breaches. He pointed out something that I am sure we will all be aware of when he said that A&E attendance seems to peak in the winter and drop during the summer. There are very good reasons for that. I hope that I do not have to explain those to him.

Of course, we have made additional funding available to the health service. In fact, I was not too sure where he was coming from. One minute, he was lamenting the fact that there were not enough resources and, the next, he was accepting that, even from the Budget position in 2011, we had increased resources available in the core health budget by £200 million, plus all the additional funding that has been provided in the various monitoring rounds. The Minister has made further bids. Mr Beggs seemed to lament the fact that certain things had to be bid for in monitoring rounds, as if that should not happen and it should all be part of the core budget. You could say that about

almost anything that emerges in monitoring rounds. Monitoring rounds allow bids for additional money to try to deal with additional pressures that emerge or which are anticipated. To say that we should not make those provisions or have to make applications in monitoring rounds is a failure to understand how the process works. If moneys become available from Departments, of course other Ministers will say, "I have a priority. I am spending so much money on it at present, and I could spend more money on it if I had it. I will make a bid for it." That, to me, is not a system that is broken; it is a system that is working and showing flexibility. I would have thought that, by this stage, he would at least have understood that.

I come now to Mr McCrea. After being upbraided by Mr Allister yesterday, I am glad that he attended at least most of the debate. His attention span did not quite stretch to the whole debate, but he attended most of the debate today. I suppose that that is an improvement on the record of the new opposition party from yesterday. I listened to him when he said that he did not want any bluster or rhetoric from me. Maybe he should take a lesson in that himself. He is concerned about a lot of things, and I counted how many times he asked, "What are you going to do about this?" The Hansard report may prove me wrong tomorrow, but I thought that I counted that question 14 times. That is fair enough. It is a reasonable question to ask but I think that if you are going to criticise the Executive for not doing things and for not having ideas, maybe you could give us just one little suggestion as to what could be done. He spoke for 20 minutes and 27 seconds. At least I was able to stay awake for his 20 minutes and 27 seconds. *[Laughter.]*

In the full 20 minutes and 27 seconds that he spoke, I did not get one idea. I got lots of questions — "What are you going to do? What have you done? Where is it in the Budget?" — but not one indication of what he would suggest.

The Member expects the Budget to deal with the fall in property prices. They have fallen by 55%, I think, since their peak. What is the Budget going to do about this? What does he want us to do? Push the property prices back up again to the point at which people who wanted to buy a house were facing house prices of 11 and a half times the average salary: is that what he wants the Budget to do?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Let me just finish some of the other points.

What are we doing to create jobs? The Member made not one suggestion on what could be done to create jobs. Indeed, he ignored the fact that at least 1,000 jobs have been announced by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the past six weeks. What is being done to address the deplorable state of the economy, which has people quivering in their shoes at the prospect of what will happen? Let me give some indications of what is in the Budget to deal with youth unemployment. There is the allocation of record amounts of money for training, especially for young people, on top of money that was given in monitoring rounds last year. There is the money that is being spent on job promotion. We are on course to reach the target of 25,000 new jobs over the four years of the Budget. There is the money that has gone on infrastructure. As one Member pointed out, we are now responsible for 55% of construction jobs in Northern Ireland. There is the money that has gone into starter homes and housing through the Co-ownership Housing Association, which will enable 1,500 people to purchase a new home. It has led to over 50% of the new houses that are being built in Northern Ireland being sold through the Co-ownership Housing Association. Builders tell me that that is the lifeline that has been thrown to them by the Executive when it has been difficult in the private sector market.

There is the record capital spending on roads maintenance, which has been recognised by the industry — the Quarry Products Association and others — as a lifeline that has been thrown to it. There is the record investment in tourism infrastructure as a result of two signature projects, which has led to tourist numbers being up by 30% and nearly 900,000 people going through the Titanic signature project in the centre of Belfast, with all of the attendant impact that that has on the hospitality industry. What are we doing to help the economy? What is the Budget doing to help the economy through the recession? Those are some of the things that money is being spent on.

This bland dismissal that there is nothing in this that helps the economy goes against everything that all the lobby organisations are saying. They actually now recognise that there have been serious attempts in the Budget to help the economy through the recession, albeit, as I said in qualification to Mrs Overend, that we cannot kick against or totally row against the prevailing international economic situation, which, of

course, will have an impact on an open economy such as ours.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way.

Mr B McCrea: I had asked the Minister to give way.

Mrs Overend: Sorry. Excuse me.

Mr Hamilton: Ladies first, Basil.

Mr Wilson: Be a gentleman.

Mrs Overend: We are talking about generalities. I asked the Minister about the £200 million that was coming though for infrastructure from the Barnett consequentials. Maybe he would like to clarify that now. Does he have further details on that?

Mr Wilson: In fact, I should have come to that point in responding to you.

As a result of the Barnett consequentials, money is spread over and allocated for specific years. We do not get it allocated to us and decide to spend it all in one year. We have had money allocated for this year. I cannot remember the figure off the top of my head, so I will not give it. It would be on the record then, and somebody would pull me up for getting it wrong. However, on average, there is, I think, around £50 million over these two years. That money will be allocated during the June monitoring process and further monitoring periods. A lot of it, of course, is to be used for financial transactions, so a load will be used for loans or equity funding. It cannot be used for straight capital projects carried out by Departments. The detail of that will roll out over the next two years, as Treasury has said that that is when the money will be spent. I suppose that there will be some announcements; in fact, I know that there will be some announcements about that in the June monitoring round that is to follow in a couple of weeks' time.

I will give way to the Member.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate the Minister giving way. He rather surprised me by saying that it is not right to ask questions. I would have thought that he, as the man with all the answers, would have been able to provide them. I want to draw his attention to the EAG work programme to see whether he agrees with it. It states:

"The EAG welcomes the priority directed toward the economy but highlights that only when measures are fully and successfully implemented will the economic situation improve."

It also:

"stresses that ownership, both at Ministerial level and senior civil service level ... is necessary to ensure delivery."

It goes on to say:

"employment creation, rebuilding in the short ... term, is essential".

There is a list of 13 recommendations here from some very learned people. They ask whether you will do something about the banks, about property and so forth. So, some of those questions are already in the public domain. All I was saying is that I would be happy to hear if the Minister was addressing those issues, which have been brought forward by the people advising his colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Wilson: He should listen to the language that he was reading: "It is only when we see the results" — the results of what? The results of the actions that are being taken? He said that there is nothing in the Budget. Results can only result from actions that are being taken. "Take ownership" — ownership of what? Ownership of issues that are already in the programme and which we are dealing with? Of course, the end product of the effectiveness of the measure will be when we see the outcomes.

All I am saying is that — I have given some examples of the outcomes — we have taken decisions, and those decisions have resulted in jobs being created, the construction industry being supported, businesses having their overheads reduced, and infrastructure being provided that has brought in additional tourists. So, not only have we done things, we have seen the results of that. Of course, Ministers have taken ownership, because they have driven them forward, sometimes — I will say this — in the face of opposition from the negative people in and outside the Assembly. That has to be recognised. He is right to ask questions, but, as I pointed out, if he wants to have some policies implemented, you would at least expect him to have some suggestions. I am not even asking him for a whole pile of suggestions; I am just asking him to give us one or two. We have not heard any.

The Member asked what the Budget was doing about banking. He knows that the Budget is not about banking; it is about how we spend the resources available to us. He also knows or should know, if he has done his homework, that banking is not even a devolved issue. He asked whether we will set up our own business bank: we do not have the ability to set up our own business bank. The business bank is a UK-wide bank. We have, of course, already made representations to Treasury to make sure that the business bank operates in Northern Ireland and provides funding.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No.

Mr B McCrea: Just one.

Mr Wilson: Just one. If we get an idea from him, I will give way, and then I will finish up.

Mr B McCrea: I just want to point something concrete out to you, Minister. It says that the EAG:

"recommend that DFP"

— that, I suspect, is you —

"and DETI engage with those responsible for developing proposals for a new business bank to support the proposals and to ensure that its design is appropriate and relevant to the needs of small businesses in Northern Ireland."

You cannot say that we should not have something. We need a bank that will finance our small and medium enterprises so that we can create jobs. I do not understand why we cannot agree that this would be a good thing.

Mr Wilson: This is the problem: sometimes, he does not attend, so he does not know; sometimes, he attends and does not listen, so he does not know; and, sometimes, he does not understand, so he will never know. At least he has attended this time, so he cannot say that the question he asked is a result of not having been in the room. Maybe he does not listen or does not understand. What am I just after saying? It is like having a bad pupil at the back of the room. What am I just after saying?

6.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Minister. Could I be helpful and remind you and other Members

that we are now in the process of summing up the debate. I am concerned that we have reopened the debate, and I am sure that no Member here wants that. I ask the Minister to continue his summing up.

Mr Wilson: I will make it clear, and I will say it in simple words. Last week, I met the Minister in London to discuss banking. During those discussions, I raised the issue of a business bank, which has been set up — I hope I am speaking slowly enough — by the Government at Westminster. The issue of whether that business bank would operate in Northern Ireland was raised. The importance of that business bank making loans available to businesses in Northern Ireland was emphasised because of the dysfunctional banking structure that we have. We do not have the power to set up a business bank of our own, but we have made and will continue to make representations to the Government at Westminster for the business bank to operate fully in Northern Ireland and to make loans available to businesses in Northern Ireland to try to overcome some of the problems that we have with existing banks. I hope that is clear enough.

I will quickly refer to the points that Mr Allister made. He should have known better, but I know that his eye is always drawn to the accounts of OFMDFM. I know that he has got a bit of an obsession with OFMDFM. He thought, "Ha! I have got them". I do not know whether he thought it was fraud or what, but he saw a line for the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, which no longer exists. He is wondering where this money is going. Has he unearthed a new scandal? Now, Mr Allister should know — I am sure he has been involved with businesses closing down and other situations such as that — that, when an operation is closed down, there will always be some residual bills, issues and whatnot to be dealt with. I am sorry to disappoint him, because I am sure that he thought he was on to a great wee story here, but the line in the Budget was simply to deal with the outstanding issues that may or may not arise as a result of bills not yet having been paid by the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. If that money is not required, of course it will have to be surrendered. It is probably de minimis; it can probably be moved within OFMDFM at some later date.

The Member also raised the issue of the Maze site again. I think that I dealt with that yesterday. It is a great site. It has great employment potential, and the full extent of it will have an immense impact on that part of the Northern Ireland economy. It has clearly been

seen as a neutral site; people in their tens of thousands attended the Balmoral show there and enjoyed it. I think that the predictions that he has made about the location of the peace and reconciliation centre at the Maze will prove, with hindsight, to be as spurious as the claims that were made when he predicted what would happen when policing and justice was devolved to Northern Ireland. There is not a whimper about it now, of course. I think that, in four or five years' time, people will look back and wonder what the fuss was all about. He mentioned the location of the centre. Of course, in any coalition, there will always have to be arrangements made to satisfy all parties. Arrangements have also been made to satisfy the concerns of the unionist community. That is why the structure of the board is the way it is. That is why the ability of the board to decide what happens on the site is the way it is. I suspect that Sinn Féin had to make that compromise to facilitate the concerns of unionists. However, we miss the point if we keep on being obsessed with one aspect of what is a very big site.

I have dealt with Transforming Your Care and the job provisions. The Member is wrong to say that unemployment is still rising. The claimant count is not rising and has not risen since December last year. That is a small indication — only a small indication, I accept — of the improvement in the economy.

Mrs Kelly raised the issue of the non-delivery of the social investment fund. You cannot win on this issue. When the social investment fund was set up — I remember it because I was taking the Budget debate through the Assembly — the accusation from the SDLP was that it was some dirty deal that had been done with Sinn Féin to make sure that money was given to all the paramilitary groups all over the country with no accountability or anything else. When you spend two years putting in place governance structures to ensure that good projects come forward; that they are properly scrutinised; that they have local relevance; that local people, who know the groups applying and know the significance of the projects and the impact that the projects will have on their area, do the first sift in scrutiny; and then they come back to the Department and have to go through business cases, you are criticised for the length of time it takes. Either she wanted the money put out the door to paramilitaries or she wanted proper accountability to make sure that they were good projects. I have seen some of the ones in my area. I am pleased with the result. I want to see the money spent; I am sure that OFMDFM does likewise. There are good news stories, so why would we want to

hold on to the money? It has to be done. This fund, especially because of the criticism that was levelled at it, has to be seen to be squeaky clean. I hope that, once the decisions get under way, the Member will be pleased with its impact on some of the difficult areas in her constituency.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. I am sorry that I took so long in responding. I recommend the Budget Bill to the Assembly.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 52; Noes 4.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Eastwood, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Anderson and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McNarry.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCallister and Mr B McCrea.

Total Votes 56 Total Ayes 52 [92.9%]

Nationalist Votes 26 Nationalist Ayes 26 [100.0%]

Unionist Votes 23 Unionist Ayes 19 [82.6%]

Other Votes 7 Other Ayes 7 [100.0%]

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Beggs, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 21/11-15] be agreed.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Carrier Bags Bill: Second Stage

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill [NIA 20/11-15] be agreed.

I aim to give Members a brief overview of a brief Bill with a big impact and the context in which it has been introduced. I will also summarise its purpose and comment on some of its key features. Members will be aware that I have taken a phased approach to the implementation of carrier bag charging. On 8 April, I introduced a 5p levy on single-use carrier bags. The proceeds from the levy will be forwarded to the Department and, after the discharge of internal costs, used to help fund environmental projects.

On the whole, the levy has been well received by consumers and retailers, and, indicatively, compliance levels are high. In my view, the levy that was introduced in April only caught up with the public mood to try to identify ways and means in which individuals and others can contribute to dealing with the issue of waste and the broader issues of climate change. I think that the public mood was very much in tune with the carrier bag levy, and that is one of the reasons why I think there has been a warm welcome, by and large, for the levy. Moreover, because of the experience in the rest of Ireland, with the introduction of the levy there for single-use plastic bags, we were more prepared for the introduction of the levy than we might otherwise have been.

As of today, no validated statistics are available, but early indications are that the target reduction of 80% is within our reach. That should bring real and sustained benefits to our natural environment, including reduced carbon emissions, reduced air and water pollution and reduced litter in public spaces.

The Carrier Bags Bill now provides for the second phase of charging arrangements. Its principal purpose is to allow carrier bag charging to be applied to a wider variety of carrier bags and to enable those bags to be defined by reference to their price. The Bill achieves that by means of amendments to the Climate Change Act 2008 that are specific to the North.

In practice, I intend to use the powers conferred by the Bill to make regulations that will apply

the levy to the cheaper versions of reusable bags as well as to single-use bags. This is because cheap, reusable carrier bags can now be bought for as little as 5p. If the levy did not apply to those bags, customers might simply treat them as throwaway bags and use them only once. That would have significant adverse environmental impacts, because those bags are usually thicker and heavier and take longer to degrade than single-use bags.

The Bill will assert firmly that its purpose, and that of the levy, is environmental, and if that is the ambition and purpose of the law, its effect should be to capture those bags that carry environmental risk, including low-cost, reusable bags. That is the purpose and scope of the Bill. If we did not go for the reusable, low-cost bags, we would risk defeating the environmental ambitions of the original legislation.

The Bill also makes a number of other changes to current charging arrangements. With that in mind, I want to turn to its key features, the first of which is the power to define carrier bags by price. I intend, in the fullness of time, to establish a price threshold to be defined in statute as the cost of a carrier bag without the carrier bag levy. Bags that are priced above the threshold will be exempt from the levy; any bags that cost less than the threshold will be deemed to be low-cost and, therefore, liable for the levy.

That approach is consistent with that which was taken in Ireland for the charge on plastic bags. I should also add that retailers will still be able to operate a bag-for-life policy should they choose to do so, replacing worn out bags for life free of charge.

I am not yet in a position to announce the specific price threshold that will determine which bags will be subject to the levy. Clearly, before making a final decision on that, I want to hear what stakeholders, including representatives from the retail sector here, have to say. In any case, this detail will be in the subsequent subordinate legislation rather than in the Bill. The regulations will, of course, be subject to Assembly approval.

Secondly, the Bill makes a number of changes to the current administration arrangements for the collection of the levy and to the Department's enforcement powers. Those include a power for the Department to impose interest payments in the event of late payment of the levy proceeds by a retailer. It is designed to ensure that sellers cannot seek to gain a competitive advantage by delaying payment. I would hope that the Department would not

need to make use of that power, but I believe that it is prudent to include suitable enabling provision in the Bill.

The Consumer Council and the Trading Standards Service have complimented the Department and its officials on the innovative way in which it has rolled out the understanding and the practice of the levy and on how it has been helpful to business interests in their understanding of the ambition of the levy. Therefore, although interest payments may be imposed in the event of late payment, I believe that the model of practice used in rolling out the levy should substantially mitigate that risk.

7.15 pm

The Bill will also give the Department additional enforcement powers, including those to permit the inspection, retention and copying of documents. It is drafted to ensure that records kept by sellers are sufficiently comprehensive and that the Department can carry out routine monitoring to ensure that sellers are fully aware of their obligations under the regulations. I have to stress that the management of the levy to date has been done in a way that does not impose any disproportionate burden on retailers, especially small retailers. Retailers have to submit returns only once every quarter and can do so online, which should take a matter of minutes, so we do not believe that, in IT terms, either at the tills or thereafter, the management and payment of the levy places any disproportionate burden on business. Indeed, the view of the National Federation of Retail Newsagents in Northern Ireland is that the levy will result in a lesser burden on retailers than heretofore.

I should also say something about the ongoing monitoring of charging arrangements. Members may recall that, during the Assembly debate on the phase 1 regulations, I undertook to keep all aspects of the regulations under review, including the provision for exemptions. On that basis, the Bill includes specific provision requiring the Department to carry out a future review of the carrier bag charging arrangements and lay a copy of the resulting report before the Assembly. However, in addition, and in response to requests from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am preparing to table an amendment during the Bill's legislative passage, the effect of which would be to provide for an ad hoc review of the exemption provision under circumstances to be specified in regulations. In other words, there would be a double review mechanism: a general review of the overall charging arrangements; and, in the event that it were

deemed necessary, an ad hoc review. As I said, the precise wording of the clause to be tabled at Consideration Stage will be worked out with the Office of the Legislative Counsel. I will ensure that Ministers and the Committee are kept informed of policy direction.

I advise Members that, in phase 2 of the charging arrangements, I plan to increase the levy to 10p. This will be achieved through subordinate legislation, using powers already available to the Department under the Climate Change Act 2008. The Department's economic modelling, which is informed not only by our sense of the circumstances here but by international experience, suggests that 10p is the amount that will maintain the downward trend in carrier bag consumption. The current 5p levy will allow customers to get used to bringing their own bags before the increase.

Finally, I will refer briefly to the target date for the commencement of phase 2 charging. I remain committed to achieving implementation by April 2014, in line with the Programme for Government commitment. Full implementation requires not only this Bill but subsequent subordinate legislation. I fully appreciate the need for effective Assembly scrutiny of the legislative framework and for a sufficient lead-in time for the retail sector. I will, therefore, continue to keep the implementation date under review. I think that I have said this on the Floor before, but it is worth repeating: when a gateway team came to consider how the original Act was being implemented in the run-up to April this year, it acknowledged that the implementation by the Department, particularly the relevant officials, had been carried out very effectively. Indeed, as far as I recall, the only issue that the team raised with us was whether there was sufficient communication to retailers and customers about when the levy was coming in and what it would mean. The evidence to date generally indicates that people very much understood what was coming and that the business sector was, by and large, well prepared for it.

I will address any questions that Members raise in my response to the Second Stage debate.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): As Chairperson, I welcome the Bill.

The Committee was briefed on the Bill by departmental officials at its meeting on 6 June, when members were informed that the Bill would provide for the second phase of charging arrangements. It will allow the charging requirement to be applied to a wider variety of

carrier bags and allow the Department to make regulations that will apply the charge to the cheaper versions of reusable bags. Members were informed that that approach was similar to the approach in the Republic of Ireland.

Members expressed concerns at the meeting that some retailers are trying to beat the current levy by charging 6p for a bag for life, which is not substantially different from a single-use carrier bag and is treated as a disposable bag. That goes against the principle of the carrier bag levy, which is to lessen the consumption of single-use carrier bags in general. I hope that retailers will be persuaded to stop that practice and embrace the principle of the levy.

I welcome the Department's commitment to another media campaign for the second phase of the charge. The first phase was well publicised, and members of the public seemed to be well informed when the charge came into operation in April. I expect the Department to conduct a similar level of awareness raising this time around.

At the Committee meeting, several members raised anecdotal evidence from smaller retailers that the current carrier bag levy had had an impact on shopping patterns and that some retailers had expressed concerns about an increased risk of shoplifting. Members were happy to hear that the Department's customer relations team had not had many approaches in relation to that and were reassured that the officials would call on any retailers who expressed concern.

Members welcomed the Department's commitment to future proof the Bill to adapt it to changing circumstances in the use of bags. The Committee also welcomed the inclusion in the Bill of a review period, which will look at the impact of the legislation three years after its enactment. It is always important to assess legislation and its impact on the ground and to make changes where necessary.

The Committee also welcomed the fact that the Bill will strengthen the Department's enforcement powers. We all know that legislation without enforcement is pretty powerless, and we hope that the Department will use the powers that this Bill will give it to ensure that the extended levy is strictly enforced.

As soon as the House refers the Bill to the Committee, we will call for written submissions from interested organisations and individuals, and members will welcome their views. I look forward to a good ongoing working relationship

with officials to ensure that my Committee is able to scrutinise the Bill properly. On behalf of the Committee, I support the principles of the Bill and look forward to scrutinising it closely at Committee Stage.

I will now speak as the Alliance Member for South Belfast. I have some reservations about the Bill. Extending the charge to include reusable bags is somehow inconsistent with the principle that people should be encouraged to purchase reusable bags where possible. It could be difficult to justify to the public the introduction of a levy on those bags, although I understand the Department's rationale, which is to avoid cheap reusable bags being sold at a lower cost than a single-use carrier bag and being thrown away after just one use. That said, we need to ensure that there is a clear message communicated to the public as to why that category has been added, as, at face value, it seems somewhat contradictory to the aim of the Bill, which is to reduce environmental harm. My preference is, if possible — I know it will be difficult — for the Minister to continue charging just 5p on single-use bags only, as it seems that the current levy is already close to achieving the policy objective of the first phase of the levy.

Although I was supportive of the initial regulation, there are a number of issues that the Bill, with amendments, could provide an opportunity to address. First, there is a range of problems with the list of exemptions from the levy. One example is the small plastic bags used by butchers and in fruit and vegetable shops or sections of large supermarkets. That is not very clear to consumers, who find that they are charged in one shop for something and not in another. I was at a sandwich bar the other day in Botanic Avenue buying a carry-out lunch. If you buy a tub of soup and a sandwich there, you can get a bag free because it contains hot food, but, if you buy a sandwich with a tub of salad, you have to pay for a plastic bag to carry them because they are considered cold food. It is so confusing, and the public can be forgiven for not knowing the difference. Some MLAs have had discussions —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member raised the issue of what she sees as inconsistency. Presumably, one of the differences is that, if you buy a sandwich, you can walk out with it in your hand, and it does not necessarily need to be put in a bag. It is a bit more difficult to carry out a warm cup of soup simply poured into your hand.

Ms Lo: Quite right, Peter. I agree with that, but I was not buying just one sandwich. The two of

us had sandwiches and tubs of salad, and we needed a bag. The person in front of us got a bag free, and the two of us had to pay for a bag.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: Yes.

Mr Weir: The alternative is that, if you want a free bag, you could, presumably, have warm lettuce.

Ms Lo: No; I would not like that.

Some MLAs had discussions with interested groups before and after the introduction of the initial levy, and I will be keen to hear what discussions the Minister has had with those who produce carrier bags to see how the first levy has impacted on them and to take on board their feedback.

Many shops, particularly clothes shops in shopping malls, have raised concerns about the difficulty of identifying shoplifters. If customers do not buy plastic bags, they leave shops carrying an armful of clothes. I realise that the apprehension of shoplifters is not for this Minister to deal with, but I wonder whether he would consider looking at the system as implemented in the Republic of Ireland, which allows clothing retailers to offer paper bags at no additional charge to the consumer.

As I stated yesterday during the Supply resolution debate, I want to put it on record that I do not agree that the Department should lose money from its already tight budget to be topped up by revenue raised from this levy. In other regions, such as Wales, the levy has been used to fund innovative and additional environmental projects by the voluntary sector. That should have been the case in Northern Ireland also. The initial levy has significantly reduced the number of bags used here, with some shops noting up to a 98% decrease. That is a great success. However, it means that the £4 million taken from the departmental budget is unlikely to be reached. It seems obvious to me that increasing the charge will be successful in reducing further the number of bags that are handed out. However, that will have the knock-on effect of reducing the income from the levy. With a number of projects continuing to require funding, I am concerned that making up that shortfall may continue to be an issue.

The Alliance Party is not going to stand in the way of this Bill passing Second Stage, and we have sympathy with its aims. However, I

believe that close scrutiny is needed at Committee Stage and that a range of amendments could be considered. I look forward to taking part in this process alongside my fellow Committee members.

7.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: I will speak briefly in support of the Bill at Second Stage.

I have to say that I was not a huge supporter of the levy in the first Bill that went through here. I can remember the Bill going through late on in the dying days of the previous Assembly. It was a very short Bill with only about four or five clauses, and it always reminded me of Trigger's brush in 'Only Fools and Horses' because, although it made it through to the other side, it was changed almost completely. It was the same Bill only everything had changed. I was not entirely convinced that it would work, but I am man enough and big enough to admit when I am wrong. It happens so infrequently that I can remember every occasion. I think that I got this wrong in my instinctive view. As time passed, when it was inevitable that this was coming through, I observed, through the perspective of the introduction of the previous levy, the abuse of single-use carrier bags in our countryside and how they were damaging the environment around me. It is clear that, in a lot of areas, particularly around autumn, you see bags that are stuck in trees and hedges and have probably been there for many years in some cases. It is very clear that there was a problem in that it was damaging our environment, never mind the problems and the environmental damage that is done in the creation of single-use carrier bags. So, by practice over the past number of weeks, I have been convinced about the carrier bag levy. I would not say that I have the zeal of a convert or that I am hugely evangelical about it, but I think that it has worked. I am getting there, and I could become evangelical about the carrier bag levy.

Because I have seen it working well in operation, I am supportive of this Bill. I am supportive of this Bill because I have seen already how some supermarkets have attempted to game the system. I can think of one in particular that charges 6p for a slightly better carrier bag. It is not one of the heavier bags or the better bag-for-life things that you can see in supermarkets; it is just a slighter heavier plastic carrier bag and is not much better than the single-use carrier bags to which the 5p levy applies. They have deliberately price pointed it at 6p, so that customers will say, "I am not prepared to pay 5p for a simple, flimsy

bag, but I will pay 6p for the slightly better one and I'll get a few more goes out of it". There is a real risk of what is described in the explanatory note as the "substitution effect" taking place, where people will pay for those bags almost to avoid paying the tax. Even though they are paying 1p more, they think that they are getting better value by paying 6p for a bag that might do them on a few more occasions. People themselves will try to work around the system by substituting the inferior 5p bag for the slighter better 6p bag. There is a real risk that, if other supermarkets follow by having a price point at 6p, you will get that substitution effect taking place. The introduction of the carrier bag levy has seen reductions in the number of bags being used, and it has been reported that, in some supermarkets and shops, there has been a reduction as high as 90%. All the good work that has been done could be undone. I do not think that we would row back to where we were, but some of that good work could start to go into reverse.

I accept that, although I am more enthusiastic about the levy now than I was at its introduction, there are outstanding issues. The Chair of the Committee raised some of those concerns.

There is still a confusion about what is exempt and what is not. She herself has demonstrated circumstances in which she was a bit confused about where it applies and where it does not. It is probably the same for a lot of people. The Minister and his Department, including the officials who work in the carrier bag unit, have a continuous job to do in informing the public about the current levy, never mind the changes that this levy will bring in. However, given the relative success of the marketing campaign in advance of 1 April, I have some confidence that they will be able to inform and educate the public about this proposed extension of the levy, in the way that they did about the existing levy.

The Minister said that the current levy had been warmly welcomed. I am not convinced that it has been warmly welcomed by everybody. I think that, generally, the public were psychologically in a position where they knew that lots of these plastic bags were not good for the environment and wanted to move away from that. People were attempting to buy a lot of bags-for-life and to bring some heavier bags with them when they went shopping every week. We are only human; sometimes, we forget to bring these things or to put them in the car. However, generally, the public were in the right space. I am not sure that all traders,

particularly small traders, were in the right place and that they warmly welcomed it.

The concerns that traders already have will perhaps be exacerbated by the Bill before us and the extension of the levy that the Minister proposes in it. However, the likelihood of this impacting on small retailers is somewhat less than it was for the existing carrier bag levy. It is likely to be only large supermarkets that are trying to introduce bags that are only slightly better than the single-use carrier bags that will be affected. I do not think that the impact of this extension will be as significant on small retailers as the impact of the current levy. I am interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on whether it will affect larger retailers more than smaller ones.

That all said, this is a natural extension — if not, for some, a welcome extension — of where we are. The current levy has been a success, and I hope that it continues to be so. The aims of the existing levy are to decrease the number of single-use carrier bags and to lessen their negative impact on the environment. There is some evidence of people trying to get around and to game the system as it currently applies. It is only right that we close down that door, and this legislation will, hopefully, do that. I welcome the Bill and support its Second Stage.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don Bhille seo. I too support this legislation.

From listening to the views of the public, I think that they have embraced this. It is something that they have decided to take on. They have taken up this challenge. It will go some way to mitigating the problems that we have had with single-use plastic bags. In recognising that, I think that we have a job to do in getting the message out about the reusable bag. The public have embraced the payment of 5p for a single-use plastic bag, and lots of them have bought bags at 6p and 10p and stronger bags, and they are using those at present. Once we introduce this new phase, besides the increase from 5p to 10p, the message about reusable bags needs to be communicated properly. Let me say to the Minister and the Department that a lot of good work has been done with traders and the public in getting out the first message. The same level of detail is needed to get out the message a second time.

One of my Committee colleagues brought up the point that people are buying large numbers of plastic bags cheaply over the internet. People are entitled to do that, but it is

something that we need to be mindful of. Although there is nothing we can do about that, the clear message for us is that we should try to do away with the single-use plastic bag, and that is something that we need to be mindful of.

There are a couple of key points. Unlike Mr Hamilton, who said that he would speak for only a few minutes, I will speak for only a few minutes, but I need clarity on some clauses.

Full-time equivalent employees are mentioned with regard to sellers. Where are you going, Minister, with that element? I need clarification and to understand better. During the upcoming Committee Stage, there will be presentations, and a lot of traders will be involved in the process.

Some traders with smaller shops have told me that people used to come in to buy one, two or three items, and they got a single-use carrier bag, but they are now buying one item only and walking out. The initial transitional period will have an impact on traders. Has there been any feedback on that? I would like to hear your comments.

Reference is made to payments. Will you clarify when payments will be gathered for the first phase? You talked about interest on late payments. Will you say more about that?

Have you any information on the definition of carrier bags and on charges through work that has been carried out in other places? Is there evidence of best practice on how that has worked in the South or in Wales? Will you give us a definition?

I cannot stress enough how essential communication is in the roll-out. Will you elaborate on records, enforcement and your dealings with traders? How will you get that message out? Will it be a case of spot checks? What are your ideas on how it will be rolled out?

What about the revenue that will be generated? The Chair spoke about shortfalls, and we had some debate about that in the Chamber yesterday. I believe that we should look at new ideas and new ways to generate revenue. We should tackle it through current departmental budgets and priorities. Any money that is generated should involve best practice and good housekeeping. I want the money to be used for that purpose as opposed to using money from our own budget.

I support the Second Stage of the Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: As the Minister stated in his opening remarks, the Bill has been broadly well received. He said that the legislators in the Department were catching up with the public mood. However, it is important to sustain support for the Bill. No one welcomes price hikes. However, the Minister was adamant that the purpose of the Bill is to improve the environment's chances of surviving well into the future, not to be a levy per se. Nevertheless, to retain some of the buy-in, it would be useful if we had some idea of the timescale of the projects so that we get the message out and people can see improvements in their local environment and communities because of the Bill, as well as it reducing the number of plastic bags strewn across our hedgerows and countryside. Broadly speaking, our party very much supports the Minister's proposals in the Bill, and I welcome them.

7.45 pm

Mr Elliott: I think that the one word that we can use about most of this carrier bag levy is "phase". That is because we seem to be going through different phases of the carrier bag levy. The first piece of legislation was introduced some time ago, and now we have what I suppose could be called the second phase. Even this second phase has two phases. We have the primary legislation, and we will then have the subordinate legislation coming with the regulations. I raised this question at Committee last week: how many more phases will we have?

Every time that you introduce a charge, a bag of a certain size or a particular type of bag, some retailers and businesses will try to get around that and will try to find a mechanism or a type of bag that they can charge a price for that, compared to the levy, is not overly exorbitant. I wonder what the Minister's thoughts are about that. There was an indication last week that he was thinking of a particular amount of money for a bag. There would be a 10p levy for anything below that price, and you would have a bag for life. You would pay that levy only once, and when you brought your used bags back into the shop, you would get replacements. I would like the Minister to give us some detail of how he envisages that working, particularly among the smaller retailers. Would those bags have to be labelled or branded? How would the retailers know where the bags came from? So, I am interested in getting some detail on that from the Minister.

The small retailers and the downturn in their businesses have been mentioned. It has been

raised with me that, because of the carrier bag levy or the reusable bag levy, some retailers have found that, instead of customers going in and spending £15 or £20, they buy only a pint of milk or a loaf of bread and leave without additional goods. I have been told that research indicates that that is a short-term issue. However, it is a matter that I would like the Minister and the Department to keep under review, simply because we do not want those small retailers to go out of business. We want them to survive and to ensure that the small village shop and the high street shop will be there for the foreseeable future. That is vital.

To come back to the issue of the bag for life, I noticed that departmental officials suggested to the Committee that the Minister is thinking of a particular amount of money as a bag charge. I wonder whether he has progressed on that. The officials said that, when the primary legislation goes through the Assembly, the regulations will be advanced but not completed. I am looking for some assurance that those regulations will be brought back to the Assembly for affirmative resolution so that we can at least have a say on them. I also hope that any future review of the regulations will come back for affirmative resolution as well. That is all for now, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Wells: I think that the people of Northern Ireland are akin to the gentleman who bought a new Range Rover to take his bottles to the recycling plant. He was not committed to anything that was going to cause him too much pain. We as a society are quite happy to go out and plant the occasional tree, recycle a bottle or, in this case, cut down on our plastic bags. However, are we as a society prepared to take the major decisions that are required to protect our environment? I do not believe that, given recent experience, even this Minister is prepared to take really difficult decisions to protect our environment. He will know that from a very stormy meeting that I had with him yesterday. So, let us try to salve our consciences by doing all the cuddly little things that we can and thinking that we are doing something to solve the long-term environmental problems that this planet is facing. We are fooling ourselves if we believe that, but at least we are salving our consciences for another night's sleep.

Apart from that criticism, I welcome the legislation. I welcome even more the Damascus Road conversion of the honourable Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton. Anyone who can achieve that has certainly got a notch on their bedpost for political achievement. Mr Hamilton was prepared to stand up in the

House and say that his initial view of the legislation was wrong. We need MLAs to be prepared to stand up more often to say that we can get it wrong. I was always a closet but enthusiastic supporter of this legislation. Now that Mr Hamilton has supported it, I am a publicly outgoing non-closet supporter of the legislation because I have some backup.

I have noticed a major change in public habits as a result of the previous legislation. I took the time to visit some supermarkets before and after the introduction of the levy, and it was like night and day. Before, the local Asda or Tesco was giving out plastic bags like confetti. People were taking far more than they needed. They were taking enough to do their shopping and another half dozen to take home.

There was a mindset that said that waste did not matter. Those bags were free, so it did not matter that they might take 50 years to degrade or would be hanging in our hedgerows for years, representing a threat to wildlife. They were free, and there is nothing a Northern Ireland person likes more than something free.

The levy was then introduced, and the Minister, in his chauffeur-driven Skoda, went to Coalisland. I never worked out why Coalisland, but there must be a very good reason. Perhaps Coalisland is the centre of the universe. I have hardly ever been in it in my life, but for some strategic reason, he and the media headed to Coalisland. Perhaps he can tell us why.

Initially, there were tales of gloom and doom: shops would close; plastic bag companies would go bankrupt; the economy would go into free fall as a result of the decision. Then it all went quiet, because, immediately and extraordinarily, the psyche and behaviour of the Ulster shopper changed irrevocably. Within days, people got used to bringing a proper bag for life, as my wife and I had been doing for decades. However, we were few and far between. In fact, I borrowed my wife's car the other day, and she gave off because all the bags for life were in the boot, so she could not go shopping.

People's behaviour changed dramatically. The only pity about the Minister bringing forward this second Bill is that he does not have the hard facts — yet — to prove just how major the change has been. I hear figures of 80% and 90%. I hear one store saying 98%. If that is true, the first Bill has achieved more in this part of the United Kingdom than in the Irish Republic or anywhere else where such legislation was introduced. That is extraordinary.

In my recent standing in queues in supermarkets, it has been a long time since I have seen anyone obtain a bag at 5p. People have been using the reusable bag for life. That is a tremendous turnaround in behaviour. The only other time that I saw a similar change in public behaviour in Northern Ireland was after the introduction of the ban on smoking in shops and restaurants, when obedience of the law was almost universal. Absolutely extraordinary, and it has happened again.

Some of us will be sending the Minister well-placed questions for written or oral answer so that he can tell us before he departs his high office how effective the legislation has been. It is saving a huge amount of plastic from going into landfill or hedgerows. I notice when driving in the countryside a lot fewer plastic bags hanging in trees and bushes in Northern Ireland than was the case three months ago. Therefore, it is having an effect.

What we need from the Minister are the hard facts of the exact position as far as the legislation is concerned. However, I see as far more important that it is taking 190 million plastic bags out of recycling or being dumped as rubbish. It sends out a clear message that the world has finite resources and if we use all those resources, there will be nothing left to sustain the seven billion people on the planet. The sad reality we have to face as a nation is that if China and India wish to consume the world's resources at the rate that we are in Northern Ireland, including Coalisland, we will require four and a half planets to sustain mankind. That is just the fact. The sad reality is that India and China are fast catching up on the consumption of the world's resources. That is the problem. It is going extremely quickly, and we are facing huge difficulty. Therefore, as a western society, we have to make the decision: are resources to be used, consumed and cast aside, or are we going to have to think before we use any element of the world's resources and recycle, reuse and reduce consumption?

That is something that my family and I have been doing in my life for the past 56 years. I suspect that, until recently, most people regarded us as being absolute nutcases for doing that, because the attitude of the Ulsterman, or the Irish man living in Northern Ireland, or the British man living in Northern Ireland, or whatever you want to call him, is eat, drink and be merry. The problem, however, is that there is an ending to that verse: it is that tomorrow thy soul shall be required of thee. The problem is that we are eating, drinking and being merry, but we are not thinking of the

consequences for the environment. So, I see this as a tiny, but very clear, step saying that we are not going to waste.

There is not much sense in controlling plastic bags when you can go into a shop and buy any number of cold drinks in tins and bottles, and there is nothing to encourage you to return them. Some people recycle them; I accept that. When I was young, probably before anybody else in the Chamber was born, there was a 5d deposit — that is two-and-a-half new pence — on all containers for soft drinks. Now, I know some of you will think that that was before the Boer War, but I assure you that I am talking about the early 1960s. If you bought what was called lemonade in the old days, you bought it from C&C. I remember that its slogan was, "Big, big bottles", and that is giving my age away. You consumed the fizzy drink, and then you went back to the shop with your bottles. I remember as a child —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we come back to the bags, please? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: I think there is a lesson to be learned for the bags, Mr Deputy Speaker, and at least we are livening up the debate somewhat.

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Ms Lo: I have certainly always known that the Member has been a strong advocate for the protection of the environment. Does he agree that we need to bring forward the Climate Change Bill as soon as possible?

Mr Wells: I think that I am being lured on to the rocks of political demise. I am not so slow that I have not had direction on that, so I cannot give the honourable Member for South Belfast my views on that issue as yet, but, no doubt, I will be educated on the subject very soon. *[Laughter.]* You have totally distracted me. Meanwhile, going back to the 1950s, there was a compulsory deposit on all containers.

Therefore, we still have a problem. Although we may have sorted out the issue regarding the plastic bags, we have not sorted out the problems we still face with a throwaway society. If we needed an example of that, we could have gone to Portstewart strand yesterday morning, after 10,000 people had sunned themselves on that beach, and seen that 14 vans were required to carry off the waste, including, unfortunately, plastic bags, deposited on the

beach. We have a long way to go, but this is a step in the right direction.

I am glad to say that this has my enthusiastic support, for what that is worth — practically nothing, I would think. It is a step in the right direction. I agree that we need to put the levy up, but I think the increase to 10p will not make a huge difference, because I think that anyone who has made the decision not to buy a bag has made it on the basis of 5p rather than if it was 10p. The penny has dropped here, and, at last, we have prompted our community to take a rational decision. It shows how sensitive the Northern Ireland market is to pricing, and it shows what can be done. Therefore, I am glad that the Bill is going to get through.

The only other issue is that I would appreciate an update on whether any revenue will be generated by this, but we will not know that until the end of the first quarter. It may be that it has been so successful that there will be a little trickle of income coming in — in dribs and drabs, as they say in south Down — and it will not count for very much. It will be unfortunate if that is the case, because I know that assumptions had been made about a much more substantial income. It may not happen, but that may be an indication that we are a victim of success rather than failure.

8.00 pm

Mr Attwood: I will start by confirming for Mr Wells that I was in Coalisland because 'Talkback' invited me to go there. It was nothing more than the fact that 'Talkback' decided that it wanted to broadcast live from a store in the heart of Coalisland, and great it was as well. The carrier bag levy was launched that morning at Primark in Castle Street in Belfast, where, as I recall, I served customers and charged them for the use of carrier bags. I just wanted to clear that up in case there was anything sinister or implicit in the comments that were made by Mr Wells.

I will move on promptly to respond to points that were raised by Members. I acknowledge all the contributions that were made. I thought that all the questions and comments were valid. I will deal first with the comments that were made by Anna Lo. I agree with her that, as before — Mr Boylan touched on this point as well — we need to ensure that awareness-raising interventions continue. As Mr Wells captured in his contribution, the threshold is very good. I will come back to what the trends might be in the reduction in the use of single-use carrier bags over the past couple of months. I think that those figures, when they are validated, will

indicate that the threshold of understanding of the issue is very good. We will continue to communicate and raise awareness. However, I think that the baseline is very good. Although we will continue to raise awareness, we will not necessarily have to do so as intensively as we have in the past. That is because of the Department's innovative approach to the exercise, which the Northern Ireland Consumer Council welcomed. That innovative approach includes how we communicate with stakeholders, consumers and retailers alike. We will continue to use that approach, going forward.

I will address Anna Lo's first point. When retailers offer a carrier bag at 6p, that is open to the interpretation that they are trying to defeat the environmental ambition of the levy. Because of that practice and the risk that people might be tempted to use low-cost reusable bags, it is necessary to have the second-phase Bill. I will come back to Mr Elliott's points about why we have a second-phase levy Bill. It is the fact that a very small number of people might tempt consumers to use low-cost reusable bags. That is the very point and principle of having a levy on low-cost reusable bags, which is captured by this Bill.

I hear what people are saying about indications that there might be shoplifting. I have to say that the team that is located in the City of Culture has liaised very quickly with retailers when hard cases have arisen. It has been very prompt to get out on the ground and speak to retailers about what the problems might be. If indications that there may be a problem with shoplifting become a pattern, clearly, we will look at that to see how it might be remedied. I will respond to Anna Lo's comments in her capacity as a MLA. The point of both phases of the legislation is to encourage people not to use bags at all. I recognise that there will be times and places when people will require bags. That is just an inevitable feature of human life and experience. However, the aim is to encourage people not to use bags at all. The reason for that is that, whatever bag it might be, whether it is the most environmentally friendly bag or the one that does the most violence to the environment, there is an environmental cost around each and all categories. It uses natural or other products, and there are transport and manufacturing costs involved. Even the most environmentally friendly bag has an impact on our environment around transport, manufacturing and other costs. That is why we need to capture as fully as we can — you will not be able to capture everything in the legislation — the bags that have that impact. The reality is that even environmentally friendly

reusable bags can have that impact. The potential for displacement or substitution means that we need to have this law. The fact that displacement bags or, to use another term, reusable bags are heavier, thicker and can take longer to degrade means that they need to be captured in the legislation.

I note what the Member says about exemptions. I have said this before in the Chamber, and I will repeat it now: the legislation will be kept under review, and, if there is a requirement to refine or retune the exemptions, we will certainly look at that. At the moment, in my view, there are exemptions that are justified for health, safety and cross-contamination issues, and that includes issues around hot food and hot drinks. I differentiate — I think that people can and will do this more and more, because most of them display high levels of common sense — between that which is hot and that which is cold or that in respect of which there may be a health-and-safety risk and that in respect of which there is not a health-and-safety risk. I will rely on people's wisdom, insight and common sense to work that out for themselves. As the levy legislation beds in and becomes more and more a feature of retailers generally, I think that retailers and citizens will more and more understand that there is a difference, based on health, safety and cross-contamination issues, between one product and another. I will rely on people in that regard.

I reassure the Member that, whilst the purpose of the legislation is environmental, I hope that the levy will enable us to direct resources towards environmentally productive causes. Even though the legislation and the impact of the levy may be more successful than we might have imagined, we will not have any validated figures until July. In any case, a snapshot of three months will not tell the full tale. The tale will only be written at the far end of year 1, year 2 and year 3, when the full deployment of the law has happened. Even on the current estimates — we have downgraded the potential income — the Department believes, on the basis of experience in other jurisdictions from which we have evidence, that in year 1, the income will be £1.7 million, and that in year 2, when the levy goes up and captures a wider category of bag, the income will be £3.4 million. Consequently, given that the internal costs to the Department of the administration of the levy will be in and around £600,000, in years 2, 3 and 4, if those figures are confirmed, there will be substantial moneys available, and those substantial moneys will be directed to environmental causes. So even though we may significantly reduce and continue to reduce the number of carrier bags in circulation, the

levy will still apply. As a consequence, there should be a significant revenue flow coming to the Department.

What will happen with that money? I have indicated before and will confirm again that there are five funding streams arising from the levy. The levy, less the internal costs to the Department, will be deployed in full. Every penny that comes in from the levy, save the internal costs, will go to a river restoration fund, a sustainable innovation fund and a natural heritage fund, and more money will go to the community challenge fund and towards rethinking waste initiatives. I want to give that reassurance.

I note that Mr Hamilton said that he was not, unlike Jim Wells, evangelical about this. My sympathy and my judgement go with Mr Wells in this regard. Essentially, what Mr Wells was saying, even though he did not respond in any decisive way to Ms Lo's intervention about a climate change Bill — that was a wee bit disappointing, given the eloquence of his other comments — was that the real issue is that, if people are saying to this Assembly that they think having a carrier bag levy is good law and best practice, can the Assembly not stretch itself to bring in other good law and best practice consistent with the terms of the other contributions made by Mr Wells, save that in respect of the climate Bill? I think that is what people are telling us. They are sending a message to the Assembly. I do not know whether Mr Wells is correct in this intuition, but, if he is and we move faster down the road of reduction of single-use carrier bags than other jurisdictions might, then the conclusion to draw from that is that people want us to move down the road of other interventions in respect of climate change generally. If that is to mean anything, it has to mean that we have challenging emissions targets. In my view, they should be included in a climate change Bill dedicated to Northern Ireland.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. This means that all Ministers — until she disappeared, we had been joined by the Agriculture Minister — and all Departments, particularly Agriculture and Regional Development, deploy adaptation strategies around emissions, given that roads and agriculture are the two biggest creators of emissions in government practice in the North. It means that we have the ambition of a low-carbon economy and realise that, if we are to have sustainable jobs in the North, that will ultimately revolve around the added value that Northern Ireland gives to foreign direct and

indigenous investors who want to invest here. That market will revolve around having a low-carbon economy and a small carbon footprint.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. I hear what he is saying, but I question the need for a climate change Bill for Northern Ireland specifically when we have one for the UK, which takes in this jurisdiction. A climate change Bill for Northern Ireland only could well hurt and impede the growth of the agrifood industry because of the reliance on that industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Attwood: That is a debate that we will have to have over the next 18 months, because there is a pre-consultation out in respect of —

Mr McNarry: Why are we having the debate now? We are talking about bags.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, the Floor is yours.

Mr Attwood: I was responding to the evangelical approach of Mr Wells and the less-than-evangelical approach of his colleague Mr Hamilton.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will. If the Member over my left shoulder has such an acute interest in this issue as to berate me for commentating on it, perhaps he should have contributed to the debate in the first instance. The character of the debate around this Bill and around the carrier bag levy is only representative of the debate that we will have to have around the issue of climate change.

I think that Mr Boylan was right about people embracing the levy. I want to give confirmation about a number of points that he made. There was some indication from one of the traders that there had been a reduction in impulse purchases because people would have to pay for a carrier bag if they were to purchase two, three or four items. Indicatively, that seems to have gone away as an issue, but, clearly, we will continue to monitor it. He mentioned people buying plastic bags from the internet. My sense is that, in the run of things, individual consumers will not flock to the internet to purchase plastic bags for their personal use. If retailers went to the internet to buy plastic bags for their business use, those plastic bags would be captured under the levy scheme. He also asked about what is happening in other jurisdictions. They have approached this differently. It is interesting that there are

indications from Scotland and the wider European Union that they are going down the road of introducing charges for carrier bags of whatever category. Although our model is different from that in the South, which captures only plastic bags, and in Wales, where the scheme is administered by retailers, we have borrowed from all that experience in and outwith these islands to shape a model here that works best for us.

8.15 pm

I confirm to Mrs Kelly that, on the basis of the revenue figures that we will get in July, we will make judgements about how quickly and how much we can deploy in the environmental schemes that we intend to fund.

Mr Elliott mentioned regulations that might come from the second phase of the carrier bag levy. I confirm that those will be by affirmative resolution. In doing that, our approach around this Bill is no different from the first Bill. The first Bill dealt with single-use carrier bags, and the fine detail of how that was to be managed was by way of regulations. Similarly, this Bill deals with low-cost reusable bags. How that will be precisely managed will be dealt with by regulations. I held back on the second-stage Bill because, in the run down to April and with the introduction of the single-use carrier bag levy, I did not want to create confusion in any shape or form in the mind of retailers or customers. You could have created confusion by saying that you were introducing the levy on 8 April and, the week before, introducing a Bill to deal with the second-stage carrier bag requirements. I made the political judgement to do the first phase of work and get it implemented and operational before we took on the second phase of work. To create certainty and avoid doubt in the mind of consumers and retailers, that was the right approach.

Although I do not have a settled mind and I will listen to the views of stakeholders about the stage at which the levy will kick in for reusable low-cost bags, a figure in and around 40p might be the right threshold. However, I will be influenced by and listen closely to the views of retailers in that regard.

I will very shortly be in a position to give Mr Wells the hard facts that he asked for in respect of the real evidence coming from the retailers about a reduction in single-use carrier bags. Whatever way the figures eventually end up, the number of single-use carrier bags used in the North in the year before 8 April was 250 million. That is an astounding figure. When you work that across to each man, woman and

child in this part of the world, it reveals the scale of use and the scale of harm. Even if we were to achieve a 90% reduction — that might yet be beyond our current ambition but not our medium-term ambition — you would still have usage of 2.5 million bags. So, even if we were to reduce our usage by 90%, we would still have that scale of use.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will.

Mr Wells: I think that the honourable Member's maths is slightly out. If it is 250 million bags and you have a reduction to 10%, it would be 25 million bags, not 2.5 million. That is still 12 or 13 bags for every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland per year.

Mr Attwood: You would not believe that I got two maths O levels at a point in my life. It was so many years ago that the maths have clearly escaped my mind ever since. I stand corrected. That intervention only confirms that my underestimation of the impact demonstrates that the real impact of 25 million is still very significant.

I understand what the Member said about our stormy meeting yesterday. It was blunt; I do not necessarily think that it was stormy. Going back to his earlier contribution, the point is that, while we may differ about a planning enforcement matter here or there, Mr Wells and I do not differ on the need for enforcement, be it on planning, waste or, indeed, the few retailers who, in the fullness of time, do not comply with the law on carrier bag levies. They should endure monitoring and penalty. When the ambition of consumers and retailers alike is to see a reduction in carrier bags and when those who use carrier bags make a payment to the Government though the levy, you cannot have a situation in which others flout the law and create a competitive disadvantage to those who comply with the law. That is why, in the Bill, we have made provision for the charging of interest on those who, even after persuasion, monitoring and regulation, still do not comply with what should be best practice. All these matters can be further interrogated by the Committee as we work through the Bill.

The message from people across this part of the world is loud and clear: they want to look for ways and means of dealing with the issue of waste and climate change. This Bill creates a further mechanism to do that, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill [NIA 20/11-15] be agreed.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Portavogie Fishing Fleet

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Miss M McIlveen: I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to raise on the Floor of the Assembly the plight of the Portavogie fishing fleet, although I am sorry that I felt that it was necessary to do so in the first instance.

The problems that I will outline relate to Portavogie, as it is in my constituency. However, they could easily be applied to the other commercial fishing fleets in Ardglass and Kilkeel, and I see my colleague Jim Wells, a Member for South Down, who will no doubt mention the problems in his constituency. I also see Sean Rogers.

In preparation for this debate, I took the opportunity to speak to fish producer organisations and local fishermen to try to understand the current hardships being experienced by the fishing fleet in Portavogie. I want to begin by stating that the fishing industry in Northern Ireland is an important part of our economy. The Agri-Food Strategy Board's 'Going for Growth' strategic action plan, published in April of this year, described the fishing industry as having:

"a very long tradition in Northern Ireland",

and stated that it has:

"proven to be robust and resilient in the face of challenge."

Portavogie is built around its fishing fleet. Previously, I brought a motion to the Assembly regarding the regeneration of the village and my desire to see greater diversification in the area. Portavogie, more so than Ardglass and Kilkeel, relies almost totally on fishing for it to function. In that debate, I pointed out that, according to a survey commissioned by Ards Borough Council, retail provision in the village consists of one general shop, a pharmacy and a post office. For all that the Minister said in response to that

debate, little of benefit in diversification and regeneration is to be seen on the ground. The fishing industry has the potential — I stress the word "potential" — to be sustainable and productive for many years to come. I will come back to that.

The publication by the Agri-Food Strategy Board suggests that the total value of fish landed in 2010 was £20 million. However, local industry sources say that that figure does not include fish landed by Northern Ireland boats in the Irish Republic and Scotland. It is estimated that the value to the Northern Ireland economy is about £56 million. That is a substantial amount that shows that fishing is a valuable asset that needs to be protected.

The industry has met challenges over the years, but, through a combination of circumstances, fishermen face huge immediate problems. The fleet's catches in 2010 and 2012 were better than those in earlier years but followed a number of incredibly poor years for the industry. Those good years helped the fleet to recover following the bad years. However, after a curtailed autumn fishing period in 2012, the fleet has experienced massive difficulties. The boats' ability to leave the harbour has been severely restricted by prevailing easterly winds. Although late September to spring fishing is not the most lucrative, it is essential to provide wages for the boats' crews over that period. With boats unable to leave harbour for long periods, boat owners have had to pay crews' wages from their own pockets just to ensure that they have had a crew on hand for when the weather improved. One boat owner told me that he had not seen anything quite like the prevailing easterlies in his 37 years as a fisherman. The fleet's activities were severely curtailed during that period. Grossing was down over 50%, and the problem was compounded by higher overheads when they got out to sea. Only recently has the fleet been able to fish at its capacity, having lost a full six weeks of the more lucrative spring season.

The Minister's response has been to say that quotas are still there to be caught and the days at sea remain to catch them. That shows a complete and utter lack of appreciation for what fishermen face. Industry representatives have advised me that it will be impossible to make up the lost ground. Fishermen say that the 10-week window is not enough, despite those men being out 18 to 20 hours a day. They realise that, come September, when the good fishing season ends, they will simply not have enough money to carry them over the winter months. Every boat owner to whom I have spoken has told me that. One Portavogie fisherman said:

"I have been 25 years at sea, and I have never seen the village in this state".

A heavy cloud lies over the fishing village of Portavogie.

The fishing industry needs to be shown that it is a valued asset in our local economy. It needs to be shown that there is a Department that knows what is going on in the industry and has a five- or 10-year plan for it. Many of the fishermen to whom I have spoken tell me that much of the fleet faces bankruptcy due to the unique circumstances that they faced this year. There is a real need for immediate financial assistance and a coherent strategy for the fishing industry.

Why do I believe that fishermen should receive a hardship payment? In December 2011, the Minister delivered a commitment to the Commission in Brussels that the fleet would be fitted with new selective fishing gear. To fulfil that commitment, new gear was to have been delivered and developed. However, the gear threatened was a Swedish grid gear, which is impractical for the boats in the Northern Ireland fishing fleet. Various grids were trialled by the fleet, and it was found that the nets were falling over onto the side and a large amount of the catch was being lost. During those trials, fishermen expended thousands of pounds on various grids while losing revenue from lost catches. The Department has not recognised the loss of revenue caused to the fishermen by trialling these highly selective gears, which simply did not work for the type of boat and net used and the conditions faced by the local fleet. The responsibility for that loss lies firmly at the feet of the Minister and her Department.

It was costing boats thousands of pounds as they had to purchase three or four sets. That investment by the fishermen needs to be recognised, but it has practically been ignored over the last 12 months. The Minister has talked about establishing a research and development fund through the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) specifically to develop fishing gear with very low catch rates of unwanted fish, but what about the cost that has been incurred to date?

8.30 pm

The fishermen feel that they have lived up to the Minister's commitments over the last 12 months and have worked with her officials, but there has been no recognition of that. What is incredible is that, despite the requests, the Minister has still not met fishing

representatives. Furthermore, the Minister has not submitted any request for a hardship payment to the Finance Minister for consideration. I understand that the First Minister has raised that issue with the Agriculture Minister on a number of occasions, but we have still seen no movement from her on that. The Minister has been asked by both the Anglo North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation to consider a hardship payment, but that has been refused.

The Minister seems to think that a few weeks of fishing will make up for the losses caused by an ill-thought-out selective gear policy, adverse weather conditions over the winter months and the loss of six weeks out of the prime fishing period. There are a number of reasons why 10 weeks of fishing will not rectify the problem. First, there are not the fish available. Because of the loss of the white fish quota, those who fish for it are now fishing for prawns, so there are more boats fishing for the same product. However, the product simply is not there, and that is not because of overfishing but is due to the unique weather circumstances. The fishermen note that the easterly storms seem to have had a devastating impact on the sea. The seabed temperatures are around two degrees lower than they should be, which inhibits the prawns from moving. Prawns have become the mainstay of the fleet following the restrictions on fishing for white fish as a result of the perceived lack of action by the Minister to assist those fishermen.

Furthermore, because of the late spring, the plankton bloom, which usually takes place in March and, by the end of April, rots and deadens on the seabed, is happening in the second week of June this year. Once the seabed deadens, that will again massively curtail any productive fishing of prawns. Additionally, although costs have risen dramatically for fuel, insurance and fees, the prawn price has been static. Logically, one would assume that, if fewer prawns are being landed by the Northern Ireland fleet, the price would increase, but, unfortunately for the fishermen, because of imported product, the prawn price remains low, so the fishermen are not even able to offset their costs with higher fish prices.

I will give one example: it cost one fisherman I spoke to in excess of £800 per day to go out fishing in the first instance. That is fuel costs and the cost of fees to agents, harbour authorities and producers' organisations, food and insurance. It does not include the wages of the crew or the maintenance of the boat or

equipment. That is for an average 65-foot trawler. Yesterday, that boat made two tows of 22 miles in total, and they were only able to catch 10 stone of prawns. On another boat, one crew member worked five days of 18-hour shifts to receive £150 gross. Does the Minister regard that as acceptable? That is at a time when the Minister is saying that there is plenty and that everything will be fine. There are boat owners who have maybe accumulated tens of thousands of pounds to cover them over the winter period but are now at the limit of their overdrafts, some in excess of £20,000 or £30,000.

The fishing industry is a vital part of Northern Ireland's agrifood industry. It can be sustainable, but it needs urgent attention because of those unique circumstances. I have not mentioned the challenges coming from Europe in relation to the new common fisheries policy (CFP) rules or the discard ban, the restrictions on the Clyde or the additional cost of licences to fish in Isle of Man waters. Going forward, the industry needs to be given attention by the Department. There is a palpable sense from the fishermen that they have a Minister who simply does not care, does not know and does not want to know about the fishing industry.

There is further concern that only a small proportion of the European Fisheries Fund money has been committed. That money needs to be committed by the end of 2013 and spent by 2015. I have been told that the Department has said that there has been a lack of quality projects to fund, but where is the proactivity from the Department to develop projects?

The Minister consulted on a decommissioning scheme last year, but the conditions attached to that proposed scheme were simply unacceptable to the fishing industry. A proper, managed and workable decommissioning scheme is required. A scrap-to-build scheme that would develop modern, smaller, more fuel-efficient vessels would be of huge assistance to the fleet as a whole, but unfortunately it cannot be delivered under axis 1 of the EFF. At present, the average age of the fleet is 40 years old. There has been a lack of investment in the boats in recent years as the money made goes on the crews or on the systems demanded of them by regulations, such as the selective gears and automatic identification system (AIS) tracking. Although skippers and boat owners are doing their best, this could lead to safety issues for the crews. The Minister needs to be cognisant of the risks that these men take every time they leave harbour.

Although grants may be available, they are not being taken up. On the one hand, that is because of the bureaucratic hoops that have to be jumped through, including filling out a form that could be 40 pages long, and, on the other, it is because they do not have the money available to pay the balance.

I note from the Minister's response to Members that she will consider support for the full cost of replacing the fishing fleet's current satellite monitoring system. However, again, that is to meet a requirement of European regulations and is not of real assistance to the fishermen or the industry going forward.

The Department needs to take an interest in the needs of the fleet, and it needs to be proactive rather than reactive. I would ask the Minister to put in place a hardship package to assist in getting the Portavogie fleet and others over their immediate difficulties. Beyond that, however, she needs to carry out an audit of the fleet. She needs to produce a strategy aimed at developing a fleet that is sustainable in the 21st century, and she needs to look at a strategy of regeneration for the fishing communities that rely on that fleet.

The Minister and her party often use the word "equality", but where is the equality in her treatment of this sector? She appears to give only a passing nod to the fishermen, but they need to be valued. She needs to step in now with measures that will see them over the present difficulties and work towards a strategy for a sustainable industry and thriving fishing communities. Assurances are needed that a hardship package will be put in place; that there will be an allocation of the axis 1 moneys to quality beneficial and sustainable projects; that there will be a fair decommissioning scheme; and that the Department will be proactive in addressing fishing concerns.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for securing the debate, and I acknowledge that she is not confining it to Portavogie but including other fishing villages around our coastline.

I do not want to descend into sentimentality straight away, but we are all very taken when we see images, particularly black-and-white stills, of how things were 50 years and 100 years ago. I spent a very pleasant Friday evening recently in Portaferry with the regeneration board, where I heard stories about how it was once a centre for shipbuilding. In 2013, it is perhaps challenging to look back and think of Portaferry in that state 100 years ago, when literally thousands of people lined the streets for the launch of vessels that would

traverse the Atlantic Ocean and people who were emigrating these shores for a new life in North America left not from Belfast but from Portaferry, but so it was. Equally, when we look back, Portavogie was a fishing village that enjoyed huge prosperity not just from fishing but from the processing of the catch. All of that was built on the hard and, let us acknowledge, dangerous work that was done by the fishing fleet.

I am blessed in that I can speak with a little authority on these issues, because I am supported by Angus Carson, a colleague and very good friend who is a councillor for the Ards area and who was the captain of a fishing vessel for many years. He still resides in Portavogie, and his family is still involved in the fishing industry. I am very aware of the daily impact of what was a very long and hard winter, when the vessels were not able to sail for eight, nine or 10 weeks in a row. Admittedly, the past couple of weeks have been better weeks, but we have to look at that in the broader context of decline and against a background where, if the days at sea do not get you, the quotas will, and, if the quotas do not get you, the days at sea will.

I was lobbied recently by some current and former fishermen who made the point that there was no assistance for the fleet at present. In fact, rather than help, there is hindrance. They have to spend £5,000 on AIS, which is the equivalent of satnav in the modern car. They talk about the monitoring, controlling, surveillance and policing of their work, and they equate it to the taking away of their civil rights. Where else, they ask, would you have a profession in which your every little action is supervised and policed to the extent that it is when you take to the seas? The fishermen call on the Executive to help, not least because they saw the bad weather payments that farmers got. They do not envy farmers; they understand that they deserve what they get.

I was disappointed when given a copy of a letter from the Minister to a spokesman for one of the fishing fleets. First, the Minister argued that the Department would go no further because it had already given:

"a year's funding of harbour landing and berthing dues that was not provided by any other Administration."

Secondly, she argued that, in London:

"Since 2008, DEFRA has been paying light dues ... on behalf of its fishing fleets."

The point is that this year's funding of harbour landing and berthing dues by the Department was a one-off, whereas DEFRA gives support year on year. It was disappointing that the Minister finished her letter with:

"A further hardship scheme would not represent value for money."

What would represent value for money when it comes to preserving the fishing fleets and their communities?

I hope that the Minister will address the issue of £18 million in the European Fisheries Fund and whether it was fully allocated in the past financial year. I welcome the fact that there will be a research and development fund, particularly to look at highly selective gear, because those lobbying me said that they did not know whether nets should be of 78, 80, 200 or 300 millimetre mesh. There needs to be clarity on that.

To preserve the fishing fleets, we should look at succession planning to resolve the seemingly endless dispute over scientific evidence. We should do so with a vision for the fleet that is strategic, realistic —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Nesbitt: — and, above all, offers those living in fishing villages such as Portavogie hope for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, there has been considerable interest in the debate, and you may take interventions, but I am unable to give you additional time.

Mr McCarthy: First, I thank my Strangford Assembly colleague Michelle McIlveen for successfully bringing this matter to the Floor this evening. I fully support that. Our fishing industry has been in crisis for many years, and, unfortunately, the downward spiral continues.

My experience is with the fishing fleet from my neighbouring village of Portavogie, which undoubtedly suffers in exactly the same way as their counterparts in Ardglass and Kilkeel. They have witnessed a once-thriving industry, at sea and in the onshore processing plants, gradually go down the tubes. Today, in most cases, any work by the fleet is, unfortunately, done at a loss, and that is simply not sustainable. I pay tribute to the fishermen, who have a very hard life. Their work is very hard, and many have lost their life in pursuit of the industry. We must

recognise that it is a very hard industry. Nevertheless, they carry on.

At many meetings of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, of which I am a member, the plight of our fishing fleet has been raised, and the disastrous situation has been brought to the attention of the fisheries Minister. Despite her concern and efforts, the downward spiral continues. Much has been said about the common fisheries policy, and hopes for a better future have been raised many times, but, unfortunately, that never happens. At present, the fishing fleet faces hugely increased costs, particularly for fuel. Some of the stories I have heard about how a once proud industry is reduced to skilled fishermen hanging on to their trade by a thread are horrendous. I appeal to the Minister, who is in the Chamber with us today, to do whatever she possibly can and indeed more to introduce some grant assistance or a hardship fund, call it what you will, to preserve this industry before it is lost once and for all.

8.45 pm

I recently met some Portavogie fishermen to hear at first hand about the difficulties that they face. These are men who have given their entire life to the industry. They know everything about fishing that has to be known and they know how to run a successful business but, because of the bureaucracy and rules in the industry, they are at their wits' end as to how to make ends meet. They are being asked to do things at their own expense and they know that is not going to work. They have been on the sea for a lifetime and they know right from wrong, but they are largely ignored. Senior fisheries officials were present at our meeting, and they acknowledged that the fishermen were the experts on these things. They appreciated the unlimited knowledge that the fishermen have. That somewhat pleased the fishermen, because up until now, the bureaucrats from God knows where lay down the rules despite what these fishermen, who have such a vast experience, have said. They were pleased that at least the officials acknowledged that they knew how to go about their business.

There seems to be an uneven playing field for our local fishing fleet. That was the message passed on to the officials. Other boats seem to be able to fish in our waters and get away with a bigger catch, and there are other inequalities, to the annoyance of the locals. I hope that the Minister will listen to the plea from the fishing industry and their representatives and agree to give some support, which is urgently required to keep the industry afloat and to provide for a

future industry for our young people, not only in Portavogie, but in Ardglass and Kilkeel.

Mr Bell: I endorse the call for a hardship fund for the fishing community in Portavogie. It is more than just the people who go out on the boats; an entire community has been decimated over a number of years. It has been said in the past; I think that the 2009 figures were somewhere around 650, which is 50% of the previous set of figures that we had for the fishing community in Portavogie before, which stood at something like just short of 1,400. We have got a fishing community that is declining in numbers, and the question that the Minister has to ask today is not so much whether she can afford to do this. I appreciate that budgets are tight — I have seen the Executive's Budget and there is not a lot of wriggle room in it — but I think the real question for the Minister, if we refocus it a little, is whether we can afford not to do something for the fishing community.

I congratulate my colleague on securing the debate. It is a very relevant debate, because the fishing community is not at fault: I do not think that it can be blamed for the price of fuel, and it certainly cannot be blamed for an easterly wind. I spent a number of hours at the community centre down there in Portavogie last Friday, and I know the area reasonably well. There are songs in history about favourable easterly winds, and I can tell you that the easterly wind that has affected the fishing community in Portavogie at this minute is absolutely nothing to celebrate. Through no fault of its own, we have a community under massive pressure, a community that has never relied on welfare. Historically, if you look at the area and compare it to any other area of Northern Ireland, it compares extremely favourably. These are hard-working, decent people who put in a hard shift for several hours of the day, sacrifice their family time and go for days on end, and all they are looking for is a fair playing field to bring something back home. Through no fault of their own, but because of easterly winds, costs of fuel and restrictions from Brussels, they are on their knees. It is time to allow those people, who have put so much into the system and paid so much into Northern Ireland, to get something back out when they are at a critical point.

In 2011, we lost the 30 fishing jobs at Euro Shellfish. At that time, Sam Warnock of the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation said something very interesting. He said that the fishing industry was "going down the drain". He said that, for the fishermen, it was an industry that was expected to go on and that they expected to pass to the next generation.

However, he concluded, just two years ago, by saying that no young person could go into a bank to get finance to invest in the fishing industry because the banks simply would not support them.

We have heard before about the fishing village initiatives, and we have had the fishing villages task force. However, we need a sense of hope that more will come through from axis 4. When Jim Shannon, the MP for the area, came up with Councillor Robert Adair to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, they raised the issue of what is available to help the community through this period and to allow it to continue. We took that debate on at Stormont with Diane Dodds and the Minister in DEFRA. Everybody realises the nature of the problem, but we now have to focus on the nature of the solution. A fisheries commissioner said:

"I believe that small-scale fishermen greatly contribute to the economic progress and the preservation of distinctive social and cultural ... communities."

Our small-scale fishermen are finding it extremely difficult, and they look to you, Minister, to see —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Bell: — given all the pressures that they are under, whether you can provide hardship funding. As they have put so much in, it is surely now time to give the Portavogie fishermen something back.

Mr McNarry: At the outset, I say well done to Michelle McIlveen. Your case presentation was the best that I have heard in a long time on this matter and on fishing in particular.

Let me trawl another angle to the Members. In any illness, there are two ways to treat the patient: treat the symptoms or treat the underlying illness. Treating the underlying illness is the only way to affect a long-term real cure. My medical analogy is, of course, a reflection on the fishing industry. The symptoms that I refer to are the rules imposed by the EU common fisheries policy. Treating those symptoms is simply another way of saying that we are trying to tweak the rules. But we are still living within the rules.

To treat a sick fishing industry means throwing away the rule book and getting rid of the common fisheries policy in its entirety. Only one party in the United Kingdom is committed

to doing precisely that: it is UKIP. The common fisheries policy is the illness facing the fishermen in the fishing community of Portavogie. UKIP deplores the decision to sign over control of British fishing grounds, which contain nearly 70% of Europe's fish, to the EU common fisheries policy. UKIP has made the following pledges, and the fishermen of Portavogie must hear them. The United Kingdom must immediately withdraw from the common fisheries policy. The United Kingdom must reassert our territorial rights, reclaim our fishing grounds, restore our fishing fleet and support our own fishing industry for future generations. The United Kingdom must return £2.5 billion a year in fish sales to the United Kingdom economy. The UK must establish an exclusive economic zone extending 200 nautical miles from the UK coastline, over which the UK alone exerts total control. The United Kingdom must abandon all EU quotas and strictly forbid the shameful discarding of dead fish. Sometimes, up to 70% of catches are discarded, which is a shameful and wasteful total of around 800,000 tons a year. The United Kingdom must require that all — all, not some — commercial species of fish that are caught, regardless of size or species, must be landed and recorded.

UKIP believes that all this will allow a proper government to determine how best to manage the recovery of United Kingdom fishing grounds. To preserve the fish stocks, UKIP has proposed the establishment of a system of movable no-take zones, allowing fish to spawn and assisting recovery in overfished areas. UKIP plans to ban all forms of industrial fishing and pair trawling for bass. As we know, industrial trawlers have helped to cause a catastrophic decline in key fish species. UKIP will strengthen the United Kingdom's fishery protection force to guard British fishing grounds, so it is no more softly-softly. There it is in a nutshell: the cure, not the treatment of symptoms.

With respect, I know that Members to whom I have listened tonight and over many years are genuine and are trying to make things better for the Portavogie fishermen, but what is being suggested is not enough. It can never be enough until we come out of the EU. The real cure and the UKIP solution is to get out of the common fisheries policy and the EU. That is the best thing for the industry in general and for Portavogie in particular.

In the 10 seconds that I have left, I apologise to the Minister. I know that she is ill, but I have a prior commitment, and I am sorry that I have to

leave and will not hear her response. I will read it in Hansard.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join Members in thanking my colleague from Strangford for securing this pertinent and useful debate. I find myself agreeing with much of what she said about the context, although I perhaps differ on her analysis of the situation and the remedies that are or are not available.

All of us agree about the importance of a local fishing industry in Portavogie, Ardglass and, obviously, Kilkeel. We also agree that the local industry has experienced difficult times in recent months, which have brought pressures on the homes of many fishing families in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. I will not equivocate: many in our agriculture industry, as in our local economy in general, including construction and farming, are experiencing tough times, which affect many homes across the North.

As Members outlined, the reasons are varied. Crucially, the changing dynamics of the common fisheries policy have created certain pressures that the industry has been tackling over the past number of months, specifically the entire episode with selective gear, which was outlined. To this end, I welcome the Minister's recent announcement that she is establishing a research and development fund that is specifically designed to meet the challenges of European legislation and to enable our local industry to overcome future hurdles in this regard. I am not sure whether final plans have been put in place, but, as far as I can see from the press, it will be a significant investment representing hundreds of thousands of pounds for the adoption of fishing gear in line with European regulations. The establishment of the fund will be matched with an investment by the Minister in the upskilling of our fleet in safety training and upgraded safety features for the vessels. In addition, the Minister has confirmed that, subject to the completion of a business case, she will meet the full cost of replacing our local fleet's satellite monitoring system. That proposal represents hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Taking those three measures as a whole, the local fishing fleet will benefit from a substantial investment by the Minister and the Department that is just shy of £1 million. As our local industry grapples with the evolving challenges emanating from the common fisheries policy, especially any upcoming obligation to land all catches of fish — Members touched on that —

we must recognise the significant measures that the Minister has initiated in recent weeks.

Will those measures help solve every problem and difficulty in the industry? Maybe not, but I am sure that the Minister, and indeed, all of us here this evening, will continue to engage with the local industry to help overcome the difficulties that may persist. It is important to lay this out: one thing that will definitely not help the industry is the inevitable detrimental impact of a reduced European budget and EFF that the DUP advocated at Westminster in calling for a reduction in the European budget. That is one thing that certainly will not help the local fishing industry.

9.00 pm

Although I wholeheartedly accept the difficult circumstances that our local fishing industry has worked in over the last number of months, I am not convinced that a hardship package at this time represents appropriate use of public funds. Let me emphasise the phrase "at this time". If, indeed, we find ourselves here later in the year, in October or November, and our fishing industry has endured a terrible summer, such a demand for a hardship payment might well be justified. We must recognise that, although poor weather had a detrimental effect on landings in March and April, landings in other months were as expected. As I say, if we are back here in the autumn and we can list months on end during which landings have been decimated, then so be it, but we must be mindful that our most productive months still lie ahead and no fish quotas or days at sea have been lost. There is every chance that the rest of this year may bring great opportunities. Indeed, it should be remembered that, when a previous hardship package for our fishing industry was brought forward in 2008, the fleet went on to land more fish in that year than it had done in a century. That is an important point: there is plenty of time left in this year.

I fully recognise the difficulties that our local fishing fleet has endured — the evolving CFP represents various challenges and will do in the future — but, equally, I recognise the response that the Minister has initiated. On the issue of hardship payments, as I have outlined, I do not think that the time for it is now. If we are still here in the autumn or winter and the case remains the same, that is the time for it. We must make perfect use of public funds.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member opposite for bringing the debate to the House.

Why is this important? As the Members opposite said, fishing makes a major contribution to our economy of up to £50 million. We are talking about expanding the agrifood industry; surely, fishing is central to that. It also creates jobs in fish processing. Another Member mentioned the solidarity of the fishing community: it goes right through — I was going to say to the chip shop, but it goes there as well.

Our fishermen are experiencing considerable hardship. Fishermen feel aggrieved that, after the terrible winter, farmers got a hardship package and they did not. However, there are many other hardships out there, many of them man-made. One of them would be like the slogan used in the washing machine advert: "The appliance of science". Fishermen know what stocks are in the sea, as opposed to what the scientists think is in the sea. There is that conflict. EU quotas and so on have been mentioned, as have the days at sea, the discards, the charges in Isle of Man waters and the requirement for different gear in different areas. In the past, when a fishing boat went out of Portavogie or Kilkeel and fished up along the Scottish coast and down along the English coast, it used one set of gear. Now it would need three sets of gear to do that. Other things such as plans for wind farms bring anxiety to farmers. Other people touched on that, and there are fuel costs, bank charges, poor prices and all that.

What affects Portavogie will affect Kilkeel and Ardglass. Portavogie is a lovely little fishing port in the borough of Ards. It is the easternmost settlement in Ireland and a real asset to the local community. The fishing fleet in Portavogie is experiencing many challenges that must be addressed, if we are to sustain this local industry. It has a good harbour and a good fleet that catches mainly prawns and herrings. Fish auctions on the quays are commonplace. The history of the fishing industry around our coast is captured throughout our towns. For example, in Portavogie, there are murals on the exterior of the local school. That shows that the people of Portavogie hold fishing in high esteem. So, it is imperative, therefore, that measures are put in place to support the community as it comes under market pressures.

If Brussels imposes further measures on fishermen, it will have a serious impact on fishing fleets and the fish processing industries along the coast. We talked quite a bit about EU quotas, and our Southern colleagues come out of the EU quotas better than we do.

I agree with other Members that we need a hardship payment but not a hardship payment for the fishermen alone; it should be for the fishing communities. Minister Attwood raised the plight of fishermen at last week's Executive meeting. I cannot agree with Chris: the fishermen are on their knees, and this hardship needs to be tackled immediately if we are to have a fishing industry next year. It is essential that the fishing communities and the fishing industry throughout the County Down ports are sustained and protected. I ask the Minister to consider axis 4 and let us know what is happening with that.

Mr Wells: This is the story of the three Michelles: the good, the bad and the very bad. I was not going to go down the route that you were expecting, I can assure you [*Laughter.*] The good, of course, is the honourable Member for Strangford, the young and virtuous Michelle McIlveen, the fearless champion of the fishing industry in Portavogie and, indeed, throughout County Down. She made a very eloquent case for supporting our fishing industry. Then there was Michelle Gildernew — whatever happened to Michelle Gildernew? — the former Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who was less hostile, I have to be fair, to the fishing industry than her younger successor. She tried, I think, at times to empathise with the industry. She failed, but at least she was prepared to sit down with the industry and discuss its concerns at length and give a sympathetic ear. Then we have the honourable Member for Coalisland, who has vast experience of a fishing industry in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and is showing all of that experience in her decisions.

I was first elected to the Assembly in 1982, and, on 12 July, all the fishing fleet came in for the holiday period. You could physically walk from one side of Kilkeel harbour to the other on the top of the trawlers pulled up for the Twelfth fortnight. If the honourable Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone were to try that now, she would sink very quickly indeed, such has been the dramatic fall in the number of fishing trawlers not only in Portavogie but in Kilkeel and Ardglass. It is a terribly sad sight to see the decline of the trawling fleet. We have a few pelagics left, we have next to no cod or white fish fleet at all, and now we have all our eggs in one basket: prawns.

The Minister's split personality is interesting. This is the Minister who is perfectly happy to give out — in my opinion, quite rightly — very significant subsidies to the farming community. At the last count, the single farm payment came to £310 million, although that depends on the level of the euro. I was very supportive of the

introduction of single farm payments. Society is saying to the farming community, "There are certain restrictions on what you can do in your industry. There are various measures — you cannot pull out your hedges, you cannot drain your wetland and you cannot use fertilizers or pesticides in certain circumstances — and we recognise that that restricts your ability to bring in a decent income. So, we in the European community and in the British Exchequer decided to give you a single farm payment as compensation for the role that you play in environmental protection". I think that that is a win-win situation for the farmer and the general community. What does the fishing industry get? It gets no single farm payment-type payments at all. It gets nothing.

We had the situation that developed at the end of the spring, around Easter, when we had the terrible snowfalls that afflicted my constituency, East Antrim etc. What did the Minister do? Quite rightly, she immediately announced a £5 million emergency payment to the farmers, but it never occurred to her in Coalisland that the wind that brought the snows and the rain to the farmers of East Antrim and South Down also affected the fishing fleet. That was ongoing for many weeks, and they simply could not go out and catch a decent income for them and their families. In her response to a written question that I submitted, the Minister said that any form of subsidy or grant aid would not represent good value. Good value to whom? Presumably, good value to her Department, but with absolutely no thought for the implications for rural coastal communities in Northern Ireland.

I am afraid that the impression that I get from this Minister is "The answer is no. Now what is the question?". There seems to be no empathy, support or understanding for the fishing community. That is unfortunate. Sadly, I have to say this: she knows that there are no votes for her or her party in her stance. There are certainly no votes in the fishing industry in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and there are certainly no votes for any of her party's main support bases. I wonder whether that is the reason for what is going on.

Mr Frew: I applaud and support the Adjournment debate that has been brought by my colleague Michelle McIlveen. It is a very timely one in support of the fishing industry, in particular the port of Portavogie, which is struggling.

I will blow out of the water some of the myths that have gone around this place tonight. The comment was made that the industry is sick. It

is not sick; it just needs to be supported. When the UKIP Member reads the Minister's statement in Hansard tomorrow, I hope that he will read what I have said, and I hope that he will apologise to the industry. It is not sick. It is an industry that is here for the long haul. It is a sustainable industry that, with the right support, can make millions of pounds for the economy and can produce good, decent, high-protein food.

I acknowledge that the Minister is, indeed, ill. She was off yesterday, and, if she has read yesterday's Hansard, I hope that she will acknowledge that, in my lambasting of her with regard to the farming industry, I wished her well in her illness and wished her a speedy recovery. However, let us get back to the job at hand — the fishing industry.

The weather plays a major part, and my colleague Jim Wells said it right: the easterly wind that brought the snow also brought hardship to the fishing industry of this country. That needs to be recognised. You have to draw parallels between fishing and farming; it is all agriculture, or, at least, it should all be deemed agriculture. It is about producing food. When the common agricultural policy and the CFP are produced from Europe, that is an acknowledgement from Europe that those industries — this agriculture — are not your normal industries. There is a social element that we depend on, and it is to produce food and it is about food security. Fisheries are as much a part of that as agriculture. It might be smaller in Northern Ireland, but it is just as important in the food that it produces through its protein. That food could be used and exported all around the world. If we get that right, very little of it will be wasted. It is important that the Minister sees fit to support the industry in the best way forward.

Let us look at the parallels. When we had the snow crisis, which affected only a small sector of farming, we were able to announce within days that we were looking for a hardship fund, and rightly so. We were able to pull millions out of somewhere to relieve the pressure on hill farmers. It is not good enough to say, "Well, it is a small section. The fishing industry is here and there and is comparable to other industries". We should support our fishing industry, and we should acknowledge the weather and its impact. It is agrifood; it is part of the industry.

9.15 pm

We have the 'Going for Growth' document. Let me tell you, the fishermen and the trawlermen,

like the farming industry, which is another parallel, cannot yet relate to that document. They can see what it means and what it aspires to but cannot yet see the mode of travel to get from where it is to where it should be. That is a challenge for the Minister. She must bridge that gap and give hope to an industry.

I want to nail a point that her colleague Mr Hazzard made about the EFF and reductions in the budget. That would be OK if he and the Minister could demonstrate why only £10 million of the available £18 million has been committed. We have to get better at using the funding and support that we already have.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Frew: I commend Michelle McIlveen for bringing this before us. I appeal to and plead with the Minister not to turn her face from fisheries and to support them with some sort of funding that will make them even more sustainable and get them by this lean period.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I hope that my voice holds out until the end of the debate.

I thank Michelle McIlveen for securing the debate. We have another debate at the start of next week, so I welcome the opportunity that we will have then to discuss the fishing industry further. You should not be sorry for securing the debate: it is a worthy topic. I am happy to come to the Chamber whenever needed to discuss it further with all Members.

I hope to be able to address many of the issues that Members raised but also to set out the position that I have taken to date and my assessment of the current position. I assure the Member for South Down Jim Wells that my position is not based on populist politics. I am absolutely interested in making sure that I carry out my role seriously, and I respond to the needs of the industries that I am here to represent and work with. Whilst he may not agree with everything that I do or say, I want to make that point clear from the start.

I understand that the Portavogie fishermen are frustrated. It has been such a difficult year so far with the weather but also towards the end of 2012, as the Member rightly set out in her opening remarks. Members have called for a hardship fund similar to that being offered to the farming community. Whilst I recognise that both sectors were affected by the bad weather,

farmers experienced physical stock and fodder losses, which is different, and those have to be replaced.

Poor weather in March and April definitely had a dramatic effect on landings, and I totally take that on board. However, landings in January, February and May were more typical for this time of year. For the year to the end of May, landings of prawns by our fleet into Portavogie were down about 22% overall compared with the five-year average for this stage of the year. Although I fully accept that that is significant for the vessels, particularly when our vessels are not fishing, fish quotas and days at sea are not used up when they are not fishing. The fishing opportunities, the quota and days at sea still remain for 2013. The Member pointed out that she did not accept that there is time to make up the ground. I do not necessarily agree with that assessment.

My colleague set out very clearly the position as things stand at this moment in time. I believe that a pure hardship package is not appropriate at this moment in time. However, I recognise that the industry is going through a challenging period, and I am happy to keep that under review. I take it on board that more changes will arise as a result of the new common fisheries policy.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member may welcome the opportunity to rest her voice for a few seconds. What she said was significant: she confirmed that the catch was down by 22% at the end of March. She seems to be tantalisingly suggesting that, if that situation remains at the end of the year and there is a very significant drop in catch, she will revisit the idea of a hardship package and consider introducing some form of grant aid or help for the fishing community. Can she confirm that that is indeed the case?

Mrs O'Neill: My door is never closed to anything. I clearly said that I did not believe that a hardship package was justified at this moment in time. There are opportunities in the weeks and months ahead for the days at sea to be used and the quotas to be fished. If we find ourselves in a difficult situation further down the line, I will be very happy to look at the situation again. I think that I have made that very clear, and I have put out a press release to that effect. I hope that that message is getting out there.

As I said, I believe that, at this moment in time, that is not where we are at.

I recognise the problems that the fishing industry has been dealing with and the challenges that it has ahead, particularly because of the common fisheries policy. We have been looking at what other measures we can take to support the industry. Financial resources will be made available through the European Fisheries Fund to include the establishment of a research and development fund, specifically to develop fishing gear with very low rates of unwanted fish. We will need to discuss the details of that with the industry, but it is anticipated that, over the next two years, some £200,000 of support will be available for the adoption of highly selective devices, and around £300,000 of support will be available towards a complete change of fishing gear. In addition, further financial assistance will be provided to the industry to review and improve skills and safety within the fleet. Finally, subject to the completion of a business case, I will consider support for the full cost of replacing the fishing fleet's current vessel satellite monitoring systems with a new multifunctional system. Subject to approval, that will be worth around £240,000 to the fleet. Contrary to what Miss McIlveen has said, I do not think that that is unwelcome. It is a £240,000 cost to the industry, and it is something that I will be able to support the industry with, subject to the business case. I do not think that that is something to be dismissed and thrown to the side.

I am picking up on some of the points that were made, particularly around highly selective gears. Again, Miss McIlveen picked up on the issue of highly selective gears. Had I not intervened and had I not gone to the Commission in Brussels and talked to it about what our industry was prepared to do, the industry would have had a Swedish grid imposed on it. That is something that the industry did not want. We were also able to get agreement from the Commission not to cut quotas, because we were able to go away and trial our own gear. Those are things that the industry was supporting. To me, that was a very positive move, and, had we not done those things, we would have had a much more difficult 2012. Again, I think that that is testimony to the support that I am prepared to give to the fishing industry: the fact that I am able to go out to Europe and fight the industry's corner and the fact that I went again in December and got an increase in quota. I do not think that anyone can dismiss those as the acts of someone who does not look towards the

interests of the fishing community. I put that on record.

The need for the vessel decommissioning scheme is complex, and you will find different views even within the industry. You will have the catching sector's view and the processing sector's view. Even within the catching sector, you will have a good variance of views. So, it is not a simple process. After meeting lots of industry representatives, I undertook to consider the vessel decommissioning scheme again last year. When I talked to the industry, it was made clear to me that it was not something that it was interested in, because it did not want to have a cap on the capacity for the time after that. That was a decision that was taken on the basis of listening to all views. You cannot listen to just the catching sector; you also have to be mindful of the processing sector. They are all equal partners in their contribution to the agrifood industry.

I have set out the three areas that we have worked at in respect of financial assistance, and I have said that I am committed to working with the industry in the time ahead, when we see how the next number of months pan out.

I think that it was Mike Nesbitt who asked about what EFF has been spent to date. There has been just under £10.4 million in grant awarded to 160 projects across six measures, and around £7.12 million of that has been spent to date. It is significant.

Jonathan Bell asked about looking to the future and EFF. By way of an update, I say that the Department is currently considering an axis 4 local development strategy and associated business case. That has been submitted by the south east fisheries local action group (SEFLAG). The business case, once approved, envisages a further investment of £2.5 million of public investment in the fishing-dependent communities in County Down. Consistent with the EFF ethos of a bottom-up approach, the SEFLAG will be responsible for selecting the projects to be funded. The extent of the investment that Portavogie will receive will, therefore, depend on the grant applications that have been made through the SEFLAG's decision on those applications. I am sure that Portavogie will have quite a good opportunity to be able to avail itself of that.

I think that what I have set out makes it very clear that I fully support a thriving, sustainable fishing industry into the future. I was delighted that it was part of the overall agrifood strategy work and part of a subcommittee. That is important because we need to look at future

challenges and what the industry needs to survive. I accept that there are challenges, but Members should take it on board that I am taking action and am committed to looking at the industry in the future. I will do that in the time ahead.

In finishing, I will point out that I am from Clonoe, which is a small village outside Coalisland. We are very parochial down my way. I point that out to the Member for South Down. I also put it on the record that I represent Mid Ulster not Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Adjourned at 9.25 pm.



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